

Truck stop plan still a go

■ Developers F.L. Roberts of Springfield will appear before the Lee Planning Board on Monday.

By Dick Lindsay
Berkshire Eagle Staff

LEE — Despite the recession and special permits expiring, the developer of the former Diesel Dan's truck stop still wants to "build what's proposed in extremely difficult times."

Steven Roberts, president of F.L. Roberts & Co. of Springfield, said that's exactly what he will say to the Lee Planning Board on Monday night. During a telephone interview with The Eagle, Roberts noted the meeting will be his "first opportunity to stand before the board" and give a status report on the \$21.5 million travel plaza off Exit 2 of the Mass Pike that was first approved 14 months ago.

"My desire is to build on that site what the town desires and makes economic sense," Roberts said. "I want it to be an appealing looking project."

"No development occurring the past six to eight months on that site is not unusual, given the economy," Roberts added.

Planning Board member Martin Deely said he personally looks forward to the travel plaza being built.

"Speaking for myself, if there's a way we can do the project that was presented, I'm willing to work with [Roberts]," Deely said.

What Roberts presented and got approved before the Planning Board in December 2007 was as a 93-room hotel and 210-seat restaurant, which he considers the centerpiece of the project. A convenience store, gas station and car wash will round out the project at a site that

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now just has a small store with gas pumps primarily serving truckers.

The boarded-up former restaurant and motel to the rear of the property — which resembles a large barn — would be torn down and not soon enough for Roberts.

"I'm not proud of the appearance of what we bought," he added, noting his company bought the property through a bank foreclosure.

Roberts had planned to break ground last September, three months before the project's one-year special permits were to expire. The developer could have sought — but did not seek — extensions prior to the permits

expiration date of Dec. 17, 2007. Roberts didn't say why the permits were allowed to lapse.

While the F. L. Roberts travel plaza would need new permits in order to proceed, the special tax agreement it received remains intact, if the proposal remains the same.

"The only thing we'd have to probably change would be the years of the agreement," said Dayton DeLorme of Lee Board of Assessors which negotiated the 15-year tax break that would begin once the first phase of the project is completed.

The special tax agreement calls for the developer to receive a 100-percent real estate tax reduction on new construction for the first year, with the percentage gradually decreasing to zero after the 15th year. Each of the five entities would be considered separate for tax purposes, thus each will get the full 15 years of the tax break, even if they come online at different times over a 20-year grace period.

"If they come back with say no hotel or car wash, then the deal is null and void," DeLorme added. "The [STA] is based on the number of employees and the value of the construction."

In exchange for the tax agreement, F.L. Roberts must create 103 new jobs — 85 full-time — and the company has said it will keep the six current positions at the truck stop. Local and state officials will monitor the agreement to make sure the company lives up to its promise.

Philip Smith predicted the project will go forward.

"We fully expect [F.L. Roberts] to be part of the community for a long time," said Smith, the executive director for the Lee Chamber of Commerce.

He noted the company has been a chamber member the past two years and has a "certain record of success" that other developers don't have in the area.

Several Lee officials say even 14 months after the project was given the green light, most townspeople want it.

"Some people in the business community didn't welcome [F.L. Roberts]," Smith said. "Others said they wanted anything to replace what's on the site."

Deely said the travel plaza is all about bolstering economic development in town.

"Lee needs jobs and needs something to happen there," he said.

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Martin Deely,
Lee Planning Board member





Darren Vanden Berge / Berkshire Eagle Staff

The \$21.5 million development of the former Diesel Dan's truck stop off Exit 2 of the Turnpike is still going ahead despite the rough economic climate.

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