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Developers Ackerberg and Northland Real Estate Group and designer DJR Architecture are working with St. Paul-based Forecast Public Art on a visual façade for their apartment project at 337 W. Seventh St. in St. Paul, according to DJR principle Dean Dovolis. The project will also incorporate modular construction and automated parking systems. (Submitted image: DJR Architecture)

New technology added to West Seventh project

By: William Morris ○ April 27, 2020 4:44 pm

A St. Paul apartment project is getting taller and adding more units, but the interesting changes are the ones happening on the inside of the building.

Ackerberg Group and Northland Real Estate Group are going back before the St. Paul Planning Commission on Friday for their project at 337 W. Seventh St., currently occupied by Bonfe's Mechanical Service. The original plan, which the city rezoned for and approved in February, consisted of 153 units, with five floors of apartments over two levels of above-grade parking.

Now the project is back with a few changes. From the city's perspective, the project's conditional use permit must be modified to permit a higher building height. Although the proposal still calls for seven stories, the developers have found shallow bedrock under the site that has necessitated building slightly higher than they had planned. But the revised plan also includes more consequential changes, converting one floor of parking to housing and adding 39 apartments and 16 parking spaces for a total of 192 and 110, respectively.

The project is packing all of that in, while actually shrinking the building footprint by 6,000 square feet, through some new technologies that have been added to the plan, said Dean Dovolis, principal at DJR Architecture, which is designing the Bonfe project. The developers are now looking to use modular apartments from Owatonna-based Rise Modular, and plan to incorporate an automated parking system to pack more vehicles into a smaller footprint.

“This is really taking a lot of the emerging technologies and bringing them forward,” Dovolis said in an interview.

“The project’s becoming a very forward-thinking project. Hopefully this will create a new trend in housing, where we’re trying to create market-rate affordability in a very high-quality environment.”

The developers are still considering several options for the parking system, but all will allow a driver to park their car in one place and have it be moved by hydraulic or conveyer systems to its correct spot and level, said Mike Munson, a development associate with Ackerberg.

“They’re super popular on the coast,” he said. “They just haven’t made their way yet to the [Twin Cities].”

Although more expensive on a stall-for-stall basis than traditional at-grade parking, the automated system is the best answer for a project with a very limited site footprint, Munson said.

The modular units, meanwhile, allow for a faster construction schedule with less disruption and road closures for neighbors, Munson said. Dovolis anticipates modular construction is on the verge of a breakthrough in the multifamily market.

“It’s something DJR really believes in in terms of how to bring housing affordability going forward,” Dovolis said. “It helps with the affordability of the project.”

Also in the works is a partnership with St. Paul-based Forecast Public Art to make the exterior of the building a visual landmark, Dovolis said.

“The building itself is going to be heavily integrated with art and artists’ contributions to it,” he said.

The property is just south of the United Hospital and Children’s Minnesota St. Paul Hospital campus, and it is expected that employees from the hospitals will be a major tenant base for the building.

No contractor has been named yet for the project, which Munson expects to see completed in summer 2021. He declined to share an estimate for the project cost, saying it remains in flux.

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