

The winds of change are blowing Demolition of Maritime Motors marks start of last phase of Reed-Putnam redevelopment

By PATRICK R. LINSEY

Hour Staff Writer

NORWALK — It was the end of an era in Norwalk Tuesday afternoon as the clawed arm of a giant excavator began tearing down the remains of Norwalk's last General Motors dealer.

The Maritime Motors automobile dealership was within the footprint of the Reed-Putnam Urban Renewal Project. Maritime Motors contested the city's right to take the property and a several-year legal dispute eventually reached the state Supreme Court before a settlement last spring.

Spinnaker Cos.-led developer 95/7 Ventures LLC is planning to build more than 500,000 square feet of retail and office space, between 250 and 350 housing units and a hotel on 11 acres cornered by Interstate 95 and West Avenue. The auto dealership's property was located within that parcel at West Avenue and Reed Street.

"We are very pleased to continue to move ahead with our plans for this exciting smart growth project that will offer many benefits to the local and regional economy," said Kim Morque, a principal of Spinnaker Real Estate Partners.

Dating to 1929, the concrete structure crumbled under the giant yellow machine Tuesday. The excavator's arm pulled out the building's metal frame and piled cinder blocks for removal.

The dealership was established as A. W. Austin Chevrolet in 1914. It was bought by Peter Morley in 1994 and operated under the Maritime Motors name. Morley did not attend the demolition Tuesday.

"I didn't want to see that. It's all behind us now," Morley said. "Thank God everybody's still working at our new location in Fairfield. The employees from Norwalk have settled in and everyone seems to be really happy and content."

The demolition crew hopes to finish its work today, said Mark Coe, director of construction for Spinnaker. While knocking down the building may appear more dramatic, Coe said it will take longer to sort the rubble and remove it from the site. Then Spinnaker must test the soil for contaminants.

Designs for the development must also be completed and approved by city agencies, said Coe. Last month, Norwalk's Common Council endorsed a mixed-use development over the one million square feet of retail space originally planned.

"We hope to be building by next year," Coe said.

The development is the final piece in the 70-acre Reed-Putnam Project, which was initiated 23 years ago. Norwalk Mayor Richard A. Moccia said he is pleased the project seems to be moving forward — though he did offer one gripe.

Laughed Moccia: "I thought I was going to be able to get on the bulldozer."

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