

Rock Hill approves agreements for Knowledge Park redevelopment

BY ERIC DINKINS

ROCK HILL – The city could break ground on the first phase of its Knowledge Park redevelopment project as early as the end of the year, now that it's put to rest a revised finance agreement with York County.

Knowledge Park is a public-private initiative comprised of a corridor from Old Town East to Winthrop University in which the city hopes to revitalize a former textile tract and attract high-tech employers and private development.

"This is going to be an exciting step forward, I think, for our community, and we have a lot to look forward in the years ahead," Mayor Doug Echols said at Monday's City Council meeting.

At the meeting, the council approved the first reading of a development agreement for a 23-acre former textile mill site known as the Bleachery, which is across White Street from Laurelwood Cemetery and is the focal point of Knowledge Park.

The agreement is with Maryland-based Sora Development, and it allows the Bleachery property to be subdivided into eight sections and sold to Sora for \$5.2 million. Each of the eight pieces of land represents a phase of the project, which Stephen Turner, executive director of the Rock Hill Economic Development Corp., said Monday would be completed by 2025.

Turner said the immediate focus is the first two phases of the project, which include the redevelopment of the existing Lowenstein industrial building and a student housing project on the north end of the site near Winthrop.

The Lowenstein building, which has sat vacant for several years, will include a restaurant, a museum and civic and office space totaling 235,000 square feet. The student housing project will provide space for 200 students in a 94,500-square-foot building.

Turner said a finance agreement with Sora for the development of the Bleachery site would be in front of the council within six months. After that, Sora will propose a rezoning scheme that will align with its vision for the site.

The unveiling of the development agreement has hinged on a finance agreement between Rock Hill and York County that the City Council also approved Monday night.

In 2004, the city and the county signed an agreement that created a



Rock Hill has signed agreements both with Sora Development for the revitalization of its textile corridor and York County for a financing plan. The textile property is part of the city's Knowledge Park redevelopment project, in which it hopes to attract high-tech jobs and private real estate investment. File photo

special textile corridor tax increment financing (TIF) district that allowed the city to issue up to \$40 million in bonds for the redevelopment of the Bleachery site. The agreement also froze the amount of money the county and school district receive from property taxes within that area at 2004 levels, and any increase due to property appreciation would instead go to the city.

The district was originally set to expire in 2029, but Rock Hill requested last year that the expiration date be extended to 2039 because the redevelopment of the Bleachery site had moved slower than expected, and the extension would allow more time to pay off the bonds. The city also requested that the district be expanded to include the West Main and West Black street corridors, both of which are southwest of the Bleachery site and run along the district's current western boundary. The York County Council approved those changes and added some conditions to the agreement at a meeting earlier this month.

The city plans to use the bond money and a \$3 million contribution from Sora to fund basic infrastruc-

ture for the entire site, including roads, sidewalks, landscaping, and water, sewer, stormwater and electricity facilities, according to the development agreement.

But if the TIF revenue generated by the first two phases of development does not cover the bond debt the city accrues to fund infrastructure, Sora will be responsible for making up the difference.

Further down the road, the city is looking to add more infrastructure to service the high level of density that is planned for the site, including structured parking, public art and historical markers, as well as transportation rights of way and facilities that may be part of a future public transportation project.

The Knowledge Park Leadership Group, a public-private entity that advises the City Council on the project, is hopeful that a streetcar system will one day run from downtown through the Bleachery site to Winthrop. The group is also considering a bus system.

But the city is not obligated to finance those additional infrastructure improvements, and will do so

only if it's "reasonably satisfied" that the project will generate sufficient tax increment revenue to pay off additional bond debt, according to the development agreement.

Turner estimated that at build-out, the Bleachery site would generate \$2.8 million a year in property tax revenue.

Sora's plans for the site include two student housing projects, retail and office space, two apartment projects, a senior housing project, townhouses, a hotel, a public pavilion, an art incubator, three parking decks and surface parking.

Councilman John Black said that creating a downtown destination is extremely important for Rock Hill's identity, and that Knowledge Park will help bolster its reputation.

"When I travel around I don't want to say that I'm from Charlotte just because I'm a bedroom community of the Charlotte metro area," he said. "We all want to be from Rock Hill, not a bedroom community or the outskirts of Charlotte."