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Kotis, Stevens plan \$35M mixed-use project on Battleground corridor (PHOTOS)

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Marty Kotis and Will Stevens have shared many a beer at Craft City Sit-in, a drinking establishment between Kotis' office and Stevens' home near the intersection of Battleground Avenue and New Garden Road in Greensboro.

Now, they plan to develop "High Ground Lofts & Shops" through Walkable Lifestyles LLC, a newly established partnership, on 10 acres, including 800 feet along Battleground, behind Craft City. The two veteran developers are planning 40,000 square feet of retail (possibly some office space) and 150-200 "loft" apartments — at a cost of about \$35 million — that they expect to have ready by 2024.

For the Greensboro developers, the High Ground property was a common topic in recent years as they speculated about its future use.

Located between Westridge Square and Brassfield shopping centers, High Ground is one of the few available tracts along the heavily developed Battleground corridor. It offers high traffic counts (31,000 vehicles per day at Westridge Square) with average annual household income of more than \$85,000 within one mile. Yet all that currently sits on the property are two modest homes obscured by trees across a creek near Battleground.

"We've had a lot of discussions about it," Kotis said. "We've been talking about doing something together for 15 years. The right opportunity hadn't arisen."

Kotis' developments over three decades include Westover Gallery of Shops, RED Cinemas and several restaurants. Stevens' developments over the past five years include Heron Village shopping center and Lakeview at Mendenhall Oaks custom office condos in High Point.

In November, an opportunity emerged for the pair. The owners of the tract on Battleground, Leslie and Dianne Schlanger, were preparing to retire to Texas and wanted to sell — and they wanted to sell fast. A buyer was sought who would close on the sale by the end of year.



ANDY WARFIELD

Though known for different development styles, Will Stevens, left, and Marty Kotis, are coming together for the first time on a project along Battleground Avenue, one of Greensboro's busiest retail corridors.

“We figured it made sense to work on this together,” Kotis said.

Kotis and Stevens immediately contracted to buy. They closed on the deal during the last week of December, paying \$970,000 for the property.

As a result, Greensboro will soon — the partners hope to break ground by early 2022 — have a unique, mixed-use development at one of the most valuable commercial locations in the Triad. Kotis, who has developed much of the “Midtown” area along Battleground just north of downtown, said vacancy along the corridor is only 1%.

Differing styles

The partnership is a merger of business philosophies and aesthetic styles.

Kotis, a big personality known for continually pondering new concepts, always has several balls in the air through his real estate developments, restaurants and entertainment venues. He bought the Darryl’s restaurant brand and operates the one remaining Darryl’s near Four Seasons Town Centre with hopes of rebuilding the once-popular chain. Other major plans he’s announced include construction of a supermarket at Westover Gallery of Shops and development of a mixed-use project with retail and housing next to his RED Cinemas.

Many of Kotis’ properties feature attention-grabbing street art. For example, the front of RED Cinemas bears a huge likeness of Marvel Comics’ superhero creator Stan Lee. Next door at his Burger Warfare, a giant robot outside the restaurant greets passing motorists.

Stevens, who worked in roles including CFO, COO and president with Quaintance-Weaver Restaurants & Hotels from 1998-2015, likes to work on one project at a time and fly under the radar. His developments have had a more conventional feel. Stevens recently finished Lakeview (five multiunit office condo buildings) and nearby buildings for two medical providers and a construction company in north High Point. He also owns the 39,000-square-foot Hillsdale Village shopping center in Summerfield.

Heron Village, completed in 2016, is a brick, 32,472-square-foot shopping center in north High Point that has attracted upscale, restaurant tenants such as Duck Donuts, Burger Batch, Basil Leaf Thai and Sushi, Qdoba and Goofy Foot Tap Room as well as a Fleet Foot runners’ store and doctors’ offices.

Kotis Properties and Kotis Holdings bear the Kotis name. His restaurant division carries the bold moniker “Kick Ass Concepts.” In contrast, Stevens’ company, William Penn Properties (commonly known simply as Penn Properties), uses the owner’s first and middle names, partially shielding him from the spotlight.

Matching city’s vision?

As lifetime Greensboro residents, the partners said they want to provide more options in Greensboro and see the city grow.

“We’re finding our shared vision,” Kotis said. “We’re going to try to mesh that up and see what works.”

The partners said that vision fits in with Greensboro’s 2040 Comprehensive Plan, adopted in July. High Ground will provide in-fill with a different form of high density housing and retail. Plus, goods and services will be within easy walking distance.

“Our focus is creating an urban center that reduces the need for cars — something my neighbors and I can walk to,” Stevens said.



Still, Kotis and Stevens will need to obtain the proper zoning. As developers of current high-profile Triad projects in Jamestown and Greensboro have seen, developing projects in the middle of current neighborhoods often draws resistance from local residents.

The High Ground property is zoned residential and would need to be rezoned for mixed-use commercial development. The developers expect to have a sketch plan to the city's technical review committee within a couple of months. Kotis said they will prepare site plans and renderings and meet with area stakeholders within the next several months.

Kotis said he hopes the curb appeal of Harmony at Greensboro, the new senior community behind Westridge Square built on property sold by his company, should mitigate possible concerns from British Woods residents. Kotis said several surrounding residents voiced concerns when the plans for Harmony were announced, but were appeased by the eventual aesthetics of the four-story facility and the vineyards Kotis planted on property he still owns next door.

“We’re committed to doing something good for the community and good for the neighborhood,” Stevens said. “We just have to figure out what that is. We trust in our ability to deliver something the community wants.”

High Ground is located in a .7 mile stretch of Battleground between Westridge and Brassfield. A new sidewalk between the shopping centers is among improvements planned by NCDOT.

Kotis and Stevens don’t plan a major grocery retailer — or a hotel — at High Ground. But residents could easily walk to Sprouts Farmers Market at Westridge or Trader Joe’s at Brassfield. Several restaurants, specialty shops and large retailers are also within walking distance, as is the Cinemark Brassfield Cinema Ten.

Odd time to add retail?

What will the development look like? Shops are expected within 80 feet of Battleground, with a mix of apartments (some above retail) and shops farther from the road. No new roads are required, only parking areas. The small homes will be demolished. The topography, which varies by at least 80 feet on the property, won’t be significantly altered.

The partners said the look will be “cool” and “edgy”, but haven’t committed to a particular architectural style.

Though traditional brick-and-mortar retail has decreased over the past years — it was hammered in 2020 by the Covid-19 pandemic — the partners said they are confident there will be demand at their property.

“What we see is that people focus on places that are the best,” Kotis said. “There’s always demand on Battleground for additional space because there isn’t any.”

The partners said they expect the housing to offer views of Brassfield and Guilford Courthouse National Military Park, but not intrude on views of the adjacent British Woods neighborhood and the enjoyment of the adjacent British Woods Park. They said they plan to get input and consider concerns from nearby residents before breaking ground.

Kotis said the housing won’t all have the same look, layout and fixtures, but would be built to appeal to a variety of age groups and households. He expects a significant number of “empty nesters” as well as young adults to become residents.

“It will be something more innovative,” Kotis said. “You’ll get a more elegant, modern feel. It will be more edgy, more hip. We’re trying to provide some options to people — that’s a big part of this.”

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