

# Planners examine truck stop project

■ Developers for the former Diesel Dan's site hope to jump-start the project this fall.

By Dick Lindsay  
Berkshire Eagle Staff

LEE — The developer of the former Diesel Dan's is once again seeking local approval to convert the existing truck stop into a \$21.5 million travel plaza — and counting that previous support for the project has not wavered.

Steven Roberts, president of F.L. Roberts & Co. of Springfield, asked the Lee Planning Board on Monday night to conduct another public hearing for the four special permits it originally granted 14 months ago. The board said it would schedule the hearing in late March or early April.

"Unless we get a flood of paperwork, I don't expect this will take long," said board member Martin Deely.

## Previous permits lapsed

Town officials first approved the permits in December 2007 after a six month public hearing process, preceded by F.L. Roberts spending nearly three years preparing plans for the project.

But the developer failed to use the permits within the one-year grace period and waited too long to seek an extension from the Planning Board, thus forcing them to seek new permits. Roberts did not offer an explanation as to why the permits were allowed to lapse.

Roberts cited the economic downturn for holding up the project, which he expected break ground last September. He's again shooting for a "middle to late fall" start in 2009, but the board asked him if another 12-month period would go by with nothing happening on the site off Exit 2 of the Massachusetts Turnpike.

"All I can tell you is I'm optimistic," said Roberts. "Everything I promised, I will do once construction begins."

## Multi-use project in the works

Roberts is still pursuing a project that would include a 93-room hotel, a 210-seat restaurant, a convenience store, a gas station and a car wash. The eight-acre site currently has a small store with gas pumps that primarily serves truckers, and a boarded-up former restaurant and motel — which resembles a large barn — that would be torn down.

Despite his optimism, Roberts admitted find-

## TRUCK STOP, continued on B4

ing investors for the project has been difficult, as well as getting national chains interested in running the eatery.

"Every family-style restaurant is on their rear," Roberts commented. "They are hurting."

He said the restaurant, along with the hotel, are crucial to the project being built.

"You will not see construction, unless I get a restaurant," Roberts noted.

## Other approvals

Besides new special permits, the Planning Board said F.L. Roberts needs to make sure the local and state environmental approvals are still good and that the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission remains supportive of the project.

"[The commission] has already looked at it and I would expect their comments are still appropriate," said board member David Durante, who works closely with the countywide panel.

Roberts said he would check to make sure the state environmental review remains valid, and he's been assured the order of conditions from the Lee Conservation Commission are good for three years.

## Special tax agreement

While the F.L. Roberts travel plaza would need new permits in order to proceed, the special tax agreement it received last June remains intact, as long as the proposal remains the same. According to the Lee Board of Assessors, which negotiated the deal, the 15-year tax break would begin when 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 will get the full 15 years of the tax break, even if they come online at different times over a 20-year grace period.

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.

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