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Major Changes Coming to Northeast Quadrant of I-64/Route 159 Interchange

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This week marks the first step in a process which will lead to a major facelift for the northeast quadrant of the property near the I-64/Illinois Route 159 interchange in Fairview Heights as representatives of the TGI Friday's restaurant there are proposing to build a new structure in conjunction with plans for not only the existing one to be demolished but also the long-standing building that has been home to the Ramada Inn since the 1970s.

The Fairview Heights Planning Commission was scheduled on Tuesday night, Feb. 11, of this week to consider a proposed amended development plan for the new TGI Friday's at 6900 North Illinois Street. The new restaurant would be located on the same property only further to the south and east, closer to Salem Place, the street which connects 159 with Old Collinsville Road, and somewhat diagonally across from the Lotawatta Creek restaurant. The proposed new location for Friday's would give it better visibility from the interstate highway.

As part of City Administrator Jim Snider's report to the Fairview Heights City Council last Tuesday, February 4, he stated the new restaurant would be 8800 square feet and

represent the first phase of a two-part project, the latter being the construction of another lodging establishment once the existing Ramada Inn is taken down. The Ramada was the city's very first interstate visible motel, having opened in the mid-1970s and paving the way for numerous others that have since been located in that part of the city.

This first phase of the work, Snider said, would cost about \$3 million and first consist of the construction of the new restaurant then the demolition of the current TGI Friday's and Ramada Inn structures, a newly configured parking lot, asbestos removal, grading and seeding and, finally the construction of the pad for a new hotel.

Also in connection with this proposed project, Snider explained that the city's Economic Development Commission will, when it meets on Tuesday, February 25, take a look at a business assistance application filed by TGI Friday's interests on January 10. The applicant is seeking \$250,000 or 8.3 per cent of the total project cost from the city.

Snider added that the restaurant is committing to increasing annual revenues by 12 per cent from \$2,400,000 to \$2,700,000 and is willing to promise to remain operational at its new site for a minimum of eight years.

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The restaurant's representatives also say there will be 26 existing employees retained when the relocated business opens while another 20 new employees will be hired, thusly increasing the work force by some 44 per cent.

Further pledged by TGI Friday's is a commitment of \$5000 over the next five years toward the maintenance of the Interstate 64 right of way currently undergoing major landscaping and esthetic improvements as the result of an "enhancement" grant received by the city.

The Economic Development Commission is an all volunteer group made up of local business and organization representatives and citizens who meet on the fourth Tuesday afternoon of every month to discuss matters related to the commercial growth and health of the city along with, as necessary, making recommendations to the City Council concerning same.

The Fairview Heights Planning Commission is also made up for volunteers who are all residents of the city and consider development related requests, commercial, residential or otherwise, then quite often make recommendations that are forwarded to the City Council Planning Committee before going to the full City Council for final consideration.

The tract of land where TGI Friday's and Ramada are now located is almost five acres and the new restaurant will, if approved, occupy a little over two acres. It is owned by a

group called FVH Acquisition LLC which proposes making the new restaurant a free-standing structure unlike now where the two are connected.

Information provided to the Planning Commission about the proposal notes that there are 157 parking spots incorporated into the amended development plan but that these are included at nine feet by 18 feet which is smaller than what the city requires which is 10 by 20. Another newer and smaller eatery in the city, Five Guys Burgers and Fries at 6570 North Illinois Street, was approved to have the smaller size parking spaces and it is not out of the realm of possibility that the more stringent requirement for the wider spaces could be amended at some point in the future to allow for newer, smaller vehicle sizes and brought more in line with what adjoining communities allow now. The parking spots at the current TGI Friday's are nine by 18.

As part of the submission from the group representing TGI Friday's, they have included design maps for numerous locations in St. Louis County that feature parking spaces which are nine by 18 feet.

A master development schedule for the project has it tentatively beginning in early April with the demolition of the existing structures to be completed by late June then a completion of the first phase by mid to late summer.