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🏠 City & Region

Tops Markets to occupy store next to downtown library

By **Jonathan D. Epstein** | News Business Reporter

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Tops Markets wants to come to downtown Buffalo.

After much speculation for months, Mayor Byron W. Brown announced Friday that the Williamsville-based grocery chain will likely be opening the first downtown supermarket on Ellicott Street as part of a larger project by Ciminelli Real Estate Corp.

The announcement marks a major accomplishment for downtown, and an even bigger gain for the thousands of downtown residents and workers who have long complained that they had no place nearby to shop. The need for an urban grocery is widely viewed by city officials, developers, landlords, businesses and other observers as one of the major missing pieces in the effort to revive the downtown core by luring more people to live in the city.

Final discussions are still continuing between Ciminelli and Tops about the location at 201 Ellicott St. Specifics, including the mix of other tenants and the financial details, are being ironed out.

“With the selection of a developer at the Ellicott Street site, it is the beginning of the process for Tops to explore the feasibility of a grocery store at that location,” a Tops spokesman said by email. “We feel it is important to the community to investigate opportunities to provide a top-notch grocery store for the downtown residents. However, at this time, we have not entered into any formal negotiations with Ciminelli Real Estate Corp.” But the city and the developer are optimistic. “Tops has shown some strong interest in it,” said Paul Ciminelli, CEO and owner of the development firm. “There’s a very high level of interest, but obviously, their commitment would be based on a number of factors.”



Conceptual drawing of the Tops, apartments, and parking structure Ciminelli is building on Ellicott St. in Buffalo.

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“There’s no question that downtown is ready for a grocery store. A downtown supermarket is great news for Buffalo,” said Adam Walters, a land-use attorney at Phillips Lytle LLP, located at One Canalside. “We’re seeing tremendous growth in residential development here in the downtown area over the last several years, and there’s no question there’s a need for a grocery store to serve the residents of downtown.”

In his State of the City address at the Buffalo Niagara Convention Center, the mayor said that the city chose Ciminelli’s firm – together with its parking ramp subsidiary AllPro Parking and construction company LPCiminelli, run by Paul’s brother Louis – to build a mixed-use complex on the city-owned parking lot.

The 2.5-acre lot, which currently has 300 surface parking spaces, occupies the block bounded by Ellicott, Oak, Eagle and Clinton streets, adjacent to the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority and Greyhound bus terminal, the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library and the Hotel@the Lafayette. It is within walking distance of Coca-Cola Field, Lafayette Square and Main Street.

Plans for Ciminelli’s project generally would feature not only the grocery store, which could be 15,000 to 20,000 square feet in size, but also an additional residential piece that could feature apartments and condominiums, as well as significant public space, Ciminelli said. He added that the store concept could be similar to Tops’ Orchard Fresh in Orchard Park.

The project would also include a sizable parking ramp, as well as enough additional spaces to handle the store’s customers, as well as parking for other residents of the complex.

Erie Community College, which is seeking to expand its nearby downtown campus, has also expressed interest in possibly having some annex space in the proposed new complex. That was included in the overall scope of design that the city had sought as part of its bidding process. But the developer has not held any talks with ECC. Exact details – such as the size, scope and cost of the project – were not yet available.

The project solicitations were sent out to 400 developers and investors, including 90 local firms, 285 national entities, 50 retailers, almost 70 minority developers and almost 50 women-owned developers.

“We feel very fortunate the mayor selected us,” Ciminelli said.