

# Council OKs 8 Mile strip mall . . .

**By Alice Collins**  
staff writer

The development group in which Southfield's mayor Donald Fracassi has an ownership interest won city council approval to build a strip mall on Eight Mile Road last week after abandoning its original proposal to buy city-owned property for the project.

Baseline Group Inc. reduced the size of its planned center by roughly 25 percent, in order to avoid the need for the city land and anticipated delays in council action.

The mall will be constructed on the north side of Eight Mile west of Evergreen at Tapert on the site of the former Mama Mia's restaurant, the Richard Sign shop and two houses. The new plan excludes the abutting Howlett building and property acquired by the city through foreclo-

sure on a rehabilitation loan.

Fracassi informed city officials of his ownership involvement when the project first came to the attention of the city, and has withdrawn himself from all city council discussions about it.

**AFTER COUNCIL VOTED** to approve the smaller mall Monday, Fracassi apologized for "any discomfort" that may have been caused to city staff members as a result of his ownership interest in Baseline.

"Every attempt has been made (by Baseline) to build a class shopping center on Eight Mile," said Fracassi.

The purchase of the city property would have allowed the firm to redevelop and improve a larger area. But that "could not be accomplished

due to a conflict of interest," Fracassi said.

The snag in the city's consideration of the project came just before a site plan hearing in early September when city attorney John Beras learned that the city property was part of the proposal.

Beras told city council it needed a legal opinion on whether the city could sell land to a city official and if so, under what circumstances. Because Beras is a mayoral appointee, he said it would be inappropriate for him to give them the opinion.

As a result a Kalamazoo attorney was hired for the opinion.

"The attorney was starting to research it, then I heard from the mayor that Baseline was reconsidering the site plans without the city property," Beras said in an interview before last Monday's council meeting.

"I said, let me know because we have an attorney with a lime clock going."

**BASELINE PRESIDENT** Walter Kowal officially notified city council by letter on Oct. 3 that the group "has decided to go forward with the development project without the city owned property. I have submitted a revised development plan for a 16,740 square foot retail center," the letter continued.

Kowal asked for quick city action on the new plan.

"Because of the numerous site plan delays, we are having a difficult time holding all of the properties together that are included in this assemblage," he said.

Council's votes to rezone all of the property for commercial use and to approve the center site plan were unanimous.

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# Mayor: No conflict of interest

**By Jackie Klein**  
staff writer

Mayor Donald F. Fracassi's partnership in an investment group planning to develop a strip mall on Eight Mile doesn't constitute conflict of interest, he said.

Fracassi's response was to a question by the Southfield Homeowners Coalition during a candidates forum Thursday in Southfield High School.

The mayor, who is unopposed in his bid for another four-year term, said he is an equal partner in Baseline Group Inc., which proposes to develop the mall on Eight Mile between Evergreen and Lahser.

"The corporation was founded by me and I acquired the former Mama Mia Restaurant property," Fracassi said. "Eight Mile needs redevelopment and neighbors are concerned about deterioration."

**WALTER KOWAL**, Fracassi's partner in the project, is sole owner of the former Mama Mia liquor license, the mayor said. Kowal succeeded in consolidating some of the property, he said.

"The piece next to Richard Sign Co. belongs to the city," Fracassi said. "The Baseline Group couldn't

bid for the property at fair market value. I disclosed my interest in the development.

"A clean, safe journey turned out to be dirty. This mayor has never been involved in conflict of interest. I recognized and addressed only the property initially proposed by the development group."

"It isn't conflict of interest when a mayor goes out and spends money to clean up slum areas. I never want to embarrass myself or my family. My integrity should never be questioned."

**FRACASSI ALSO WAS** asked about his statement that a comprehensive wetlands preservation ordinance would freeze growth and the city would be responsible for buying off parcels of land for which development may be denied.

Fracassi doesn't oppose such an ordinance but is concerned about parts of it, he said.

"The city has fought to protect woods, waterways and flood plains," he said. "But an overabundance of controls leads to no flexibility in the future. The proposed ordinance stops all growth of residential and commercial development."

According to Fracassi, only 1,700

acres of land remain undeveloped. Most of the land is residentially zoned on flood plains near wetlands, he said. Vacant land on the west side of the city is near wetlands and the Rouge River, he said.

"If you don't allow taxpayers to use their own land who will pay for it?" Fracassi asked. "Look at the costs and the flexibility. Wetland property near the American Center is worth \$30 million."

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