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SouthField lands landmark first commercial tenant

WEYMOUTH – A Hingham software startup has committed to become the first commercial tenant at SouthField, a move that Weymouth officials say could signal the beginning of a long-awaited economic boom for the town and the region.

Deja View Concepts has committed to lease a 30,000-square-foot space in a vacant building next to the old aircraft hangar that's been converted into movie studio space. The buildings are left over from the property's previous life as the South Weymouth Naval Air Station.

After years of false starts and delays, the project has picked up momentum under its new owner, LStar Communities. But the commercial development that was supposed to be the backbone of the project by boosting tax revenue and creating jobs has lagged.

Weymouth Mayor Robert Hedlund said the deal with Deja View is a sign that that's about to change as more commercial tenants follow.

"We're very excited," he said. "I think it's going to open up the floodgates."

SouthField covers more than 1,400 acres in Weymouth, Rockland and Abington. The hangar and adjacent building are in the Weymouth section.

Plans for the project include 3,855 homes and apartments and up to 3 million square feet of commercial.

Deja View makes video software and smartphone applications, including Papparazzi Pass, which allows guests at resorts to download candid pictures of themselves via their smartphones, and a phone-based security pass system that replaces electronic key fobs.

The company has four full-time employees who work out of an approximately 2,000-square-foot office on Station Street in Hingham. With the move to SouthField, they plan to switch from using dozens of contractors overseas to full-time, in-house positions out of the larger space, Chief Financial Officer Winthrop Sargent said.

Sargent said he was familiar with the SouthField project – as well as its past struggles – and that the former base presented a perfect spot for his company’s expansion.

“It’s kind of a long-term play,” he said. “Think about it – you’re 12 miles from Boston on 1,500 acres. Where else are you going to go?”

He said the location offers lower costs than tech hubs in Boston and Cambridge with access to the commuter rail that could draw in qualified workers.

The deal with Deja View comes as LStar marks its first anniversary as master developer of the project. In that time it has signed several deals with residential developers, won approval for new zoning to allow more residential and commercial development and transformed the project’s troubled image.

LStar has said interest from potential commercial developers and builders has been strong and company officials have promised they can deliver on the commercial end.

“It’s an enormous validation of the project,” Matthew Barry, president of LStar’s New England division, said Tuesday. “This is the very first of many to come.”

Barry said LStar is working on plans to renovate the building, which had housed a machine shop, classrooms and offices before the Navy left in 1997. He said the project will likely cost between \$15 million and \$18 million and it should be ready for tenants to move in by the end of 2017. LStar will maintain ownership of the renovated building.

While landing its first commercial tenant is a milestone, LStar is still waiting for its first deal with a builder to put up new office or manufacturing space.

Still, the planned move by Deja View and its promise of new tax revenue and jobs in Weymouth was welcome news to elected officials.

“You’ve got to have a first step and this is clearly our first commercial step,” said Town Councilor Michael Smart, whose district includes the Weymouth portion of SouthField. “Hopefully it’s a sign of more things to come.”

Peter Forman, president of the South Shore Chamber of Commerce, said other companies are already eyeing SouthField and interest will only increase as more move in.

“Once people see others going in, you’re going to see a lot of other companies very anxious to go in,” he said. “We just don’t know when that’s going to be or what the critical mass is.”

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