

Jail redeveloper poised to add swim club tract

By Jon Meoli
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The County Council was scheduled to approve a contract this week that would give full use of the former Towson jail property on Bosley Avenue to Towson Jail Associates, the company that has already restored the historic jail into an office building and maintained the property since 2009.

Though the tract, on the northwest corner of Bosley Avenue and Towsontown Boulevard, is already widely known as the Towson jail property, the former Towson Swim Club organization actually held the lease from the county for most of the land surrounding the old jail building.

But a new arrangement became available when the proposed Towson Swim Club project was terminated in March, after a last-ditch membership drive that was necessary to secure a loan for construction fell short.

Martin Azola, president of Azola and Associates Inc., which created Towson Jail Associates, said the only plan the company has for the property is to "be good caretakers and good neighbors."

"We don't just do things that are not popular," said Azola, who grew up on nearby Dixie Drive. "We don't grossly rezone or tear down historic things to build an ugly high-rise. We're preservation-minded developers and builders."

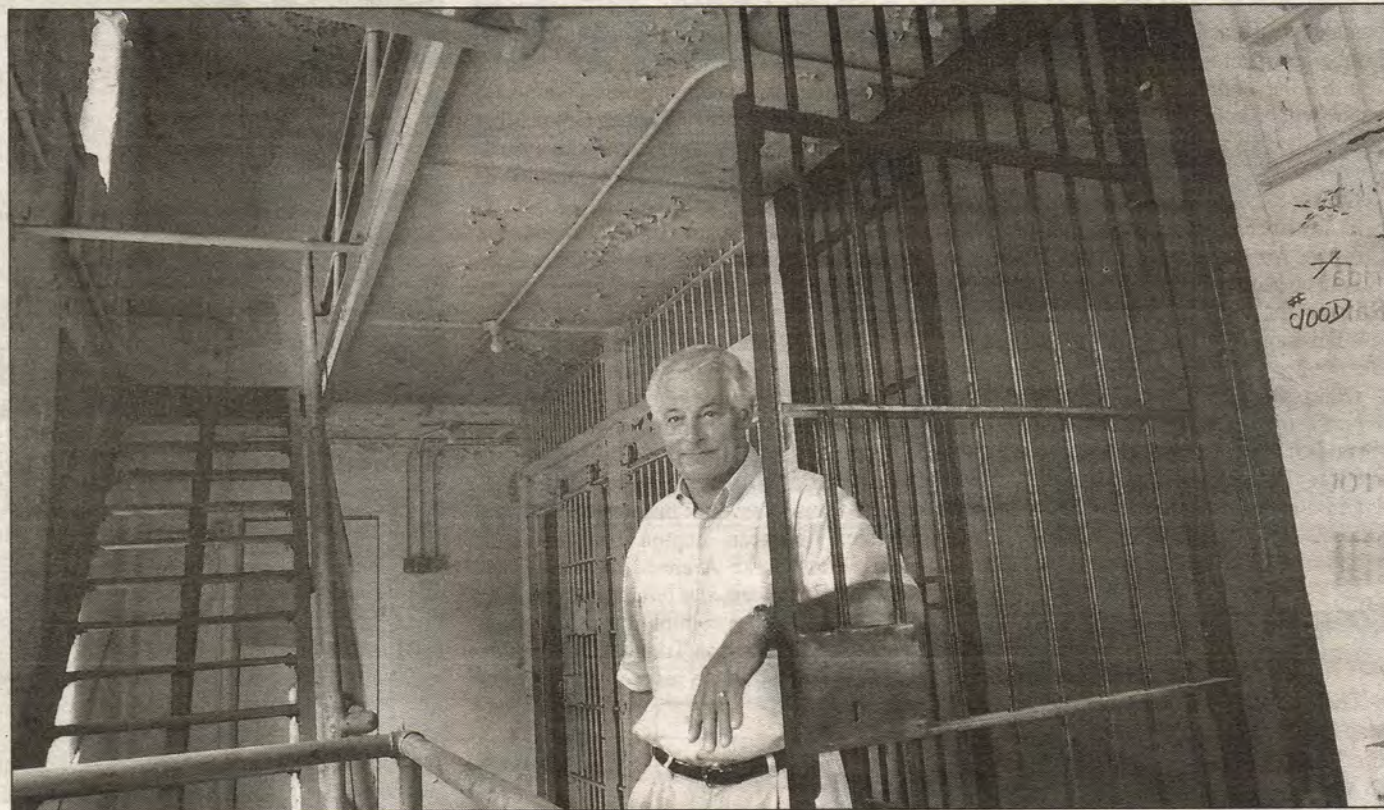
In the case of the former swim club site, he said, doing nothing "is the right thing to do, with respect to the community and people on both sides of that equation."

In 2009, Towson Jail Associates took over the historic jail building from the county, renovated it and turned it into an office building that reopened in 2011 to positive reviews from the county and the business community.

Azola said his company had the "right of first refusal" to pick up the swim club's lease in the event the project failed. Soon after the swim club plans were scrapped, he expressed an interest in making the office building and the open land into one large property.

He said the initial plan is to cut back some "nasty" bushes that hang over the sidewalk, pave a gravel parking lot behind the building and add a row of parking that was originally part of the swim club plans.

Azola sought the services of the land-



FILE PHOTO / 2009

Marty Azola, shown in a 2009 photo in the former Towson jail, renovated that facility into office space in 2011. The County Council was expected this week to extend his long-term lease to include adjacent property that had been targeted for the Towson Swim Club. The swim center proposal failed earlier this year.

scape architect who worked on the community park in Southland Hills in order to have "some sameness of hand" in the area, but ultimately decided that the jail property and park each had its own character.

He does, however, plan to plant some "attractive trees" around the periphery of the building later this fall.

Though there will be some construction at the site when the additional parking is constructed, community leaders who have seen the plan say it is in line with the neighborhoods' desires for the property.

"The community has always been concerned that the jail property will be overdeveloped," said 5th District Councilman David Marks, who represents Towson.

One of the sticking points of the swim club plan had been its initial proposal to place some recreational features in or near the "green ravine," a segment of the property that neighbors consider a buffer between the

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tract and the residential community.

Marks said this that, "I'm downzoning the green ravine, and the county has given me assurances that the property will never be commercialized."

Therese McAllister, president of the Southland Hills Improvement Association, said Azola has been "very impressive" with his work in restoring the old jail building.

"He has good tenants there within the building, and we're hoping that he will do things to improve the landscaping on the outside so that it blends in more, aesthetically, to a residential neighborhood," she said.

The contract, which originally began on June 9, 2009, was for a 40-year term, with options to renew for three successive 20-year terms.

Under the amended agreement, Towson Jail Associates will pay \$9,994.36 in property taxes for 2012, \$13,821.79 for 2013, with a 3 percent increase every year.

The amended contract was scheduled to be voted on by the County Council at its session on Sept. 4. For details on the final vote, go to www.towsontimes.com/towson.