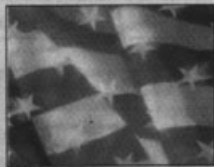


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Developer gets extra 2 weeks in 7-year downtown quest

By Debbie Carson
Staff Writer

The air was warm and thick in the City Council chambers last Tuesday night, March 6, as dozens sat in the audience expecting to hear the council make a final decision – sign on Pinnacle/Ram to build the city's downtown dream project or move on to the next developer in the seven-year quest.

As the meeting progressed through the night, the air wasn't the only thing in the room getting warmer by the minute. Frustrations and tension began to mount – not just between the council and the devel-

oper, and also among council members themselves.

Pinnacle/Ram was supposed to present its latest plans for the city's downtown redevelopment project.

Faced with a short time span, the developer was unable to come up with financial figures or even specifics about the new plans.

Scott "Skipper" Peek, of Pinnacle Realty Advisors, said that his team has been working as best it can to come up with a plan that would work for the city.

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City Councilman Ron Govtni speaks his mind to Michael Hammon, managing partner of Ram Development Company, during a CRA meeting Feb. 20. Staff photo by Keith Carson.

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"We've been scurrying," Peek said. "We've been really peddling pretty hard," he added moments later.

The team had asked the city for an extension so it could come up with the financial numbers the city was looking for. The city denied the request.

The Temple Terrace City Council voted 3-2 to grant Pinnacle/Ram two more weeks to finalize its plans and financial figures for the downtown project.

Council members Ken Halloway and Alison Fernandez voted against the motion.

At the prior council meeting, on Feb. 20, the council voted 4-1 to give the developer more time, with Halloway being the lone dissenter.

Peek mentioned changes between the latest set of plans and the prior set.

The newer plans — which Pinnacle/Ram did not have visual aids for — calls for a parking deck in the northwest corner of the project, near where the Burger King is currently located at the corner of N. 56th Street and Bullard Parkway.

Peek also noted that the new plans call for higher density, though he couldn't recall the numbers.

"The music hasn't stopped on these plans yet," Peek said, explaining that some work still needs to be done.

The developer has also pushed the proposed "Main Street" (a north-south road linking Bullard to Chicago Avenue) farther east in the site and changed other street alignments.

When Councilwoman Alison Fernandez asked Peek what retailers the developer has in mind to sign onto the project, he was vague and didn't give specific names.

Instead, he said that the downtown area would draw several casual and high end restaurants, which would serve as the main magnet for people to come to the area.

Peek said that the downtown redevelopment area would not have the regional draw that International Plaza has, nor the sub-regional draw of the Westfield Citrus Park Town Center.

Govin supported Chillura's position, noting that Peek has said that the plans have changed and that the developer has taken under advisement what the council and staff has suggested.

"We have numbers we never had before," Govin said, pointing out that the city has come a long way from where it started four weeks ago. "We have direction we never had."

"I don't know what you all are listening to," Govin continued, addressing the council, but he has heard Pinnacle/Ram say that changes are being made.

Nearly an hour into the discussion and debate, Chillura became fed up with the way the council was handling the meeting.

"This is just getting out of control," he said. "We have somebody busting their butts."

"We dragged our butts with Unicorp for a year and a half and they (Unicorp) sat there and lied to us."

He continued on, saying that Pinnacle/Ram has been working hard to be responsive to the city and has been meeting with staff to create their plans.

"I don't blame that man (Peek) if he got up right now and said 'You know, to hell with you, I'm outta here.'"

Chillura chastised the council, scolding them for telling the developer that the plan is a strip mall. He said that council needs to tell Pinnacle/Ram that they appreciate the developer working with them.

"If you nuke this developer, then Vlass has got you against the wall," Chillura said in response to Halloway's call for moving on to the next developer. Temple Terrace Investments, which consists of The Vlass Group and two others, would be the next developer in line to try for the downtown project.

"You're at their mercy," Chillura continued. "If Vlass doesn't work and you back out, you might as well just scratch the plan. And that project is not going to change. It's going to stay stale on the market. And it's not going to go anywhere."

Mayor Affronti was frustrated that Pinnacle/Ram has not yet come up with a

"Plan B") several times and I don't think it's fair or appropriate," Peek said near the end of the 1.5-hour long meeting. "We have been killing ourselves for this community," he continued, noting that Pinnacle/Ram has spent an "unbelievable" amount of time and money on the downtown project.

Just before the council made the decision to give the developer another two weeks to fine-tune its plans, Affronti asked the city's attorney, Ted Taub, to weigh in.

Taub said that though he has many thoughts on the way the project is progressing, he said he preferred not to voice them.

"I'm not worried about my job," the attorney said, though he said he was concerned that some on the council might resent his commentary.

"I have a lot of concerns for the city I've represented for over 35 years," said Taub.

Pinnacle/Ram is scheduled to make its presentation at the next council meeting on March 20. For the third straight council meeting, the council is expected to make a final decision — keep or toss Pinnacle/Ram. *For the results of the March 20 council meeting, check the Beacon's Web site, www.CNewsPubs.com and find the complete article in the March 28 edition of the Beacon.*

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could be characterized as sitting in the "cat bird's seat" since the grocer has a renewable lease that could allow them to stay until 2044 — far longer than any existing city leader is likely to be around.

Sweetbay officials were looking to the city for more than \$3 million to break its lease and move the newly remodeled Kash n' Karri-turned-Sweetbay elsewhere within the redevelopment zone.

One city council member in particular has criticized the company, calling into question the grocer's ability to stay competitive in the market.

Until recently, Sweetbay had been the proverbial thorn in the city's side.

The grocer wanted millions of dollars to move elsewhere for the sake of the downtown

Fernandez commented that she was hoping the downtown project would be more than just a shopping experience for residents.

"We're trying as hard as we can," Peek said of striking the balance between providing residential, office and retail space.

"This is a horrible residential market," he said. "It's really bad."

Councilman Ron Govin, who is the council's representative at meetings with the developer and staff, told Peek he was a little disappointed that the developer did not have all the information ready in time for the March 6 meeting.

"I wanted to be patient on one hand," Govin said, "but yet feeling the urgency on the other hand."

Govin and other council members said that they would not be able to make a decision on Pinnacle/Ram's latest plans until they have all the information.

"We're going as fast as we can go," Peek said.

Councilman Ken Hallowsay told Peek and the council that he would be willing to grant the developer more time to tweak the plans if he knew that those plans were substantially different from what has already been presented.

"It doesn't appear to me that we're going to get there," Hallowsay said, adding, "I think we're drilling a dry hole. I think it's time to call a stop to that and move on to our second developer."

Mayor Joe Affronti seemed to share the councilman's sentiments.

"We're no further today than we were four weeks ago," Affronti said. "I'm very disillusioned."

Councilman Frank Chillura pointed out to his fellow council members that every time the council has met with Pinnacle/Ram, the developer's plans have changed to reflect the council's desires.

Peek told the council that while there have not been "wholesale" changes in the newest plans, "certain aspects of the plan are very bold and very different."

plan the city can work with. He asked the council, specifically Govin, Chillura and Councilman Mark Knapp, what they do if they agree to a deadline for work and then realize they need more time - similar to what has happened between Pinnacle/Ram and the city.

Govin was the first to respond, noting that if the customer - meaning the city - keeps changing the "ground rules" then more time should be given. In this case, the major change was that the council finally decided to keep Sweetbay where it is and not move it.

"I think we had a change order," Govin said.

Knapp, who works in construction, said that about 80 percent of his customers come to his office with a plan, but once they find out how much that plan is going to cost them, they have to scale it back - not unlike what the city has done.

"I don't feel they came through the way they should have," Affronti said.

Community Services Director Ralph Bosek also aired his frustration over the status of the project.

Bosek told the council that the staff repeatedly told Pinnacle/Ram that the city probably could not afford to move Sweetbay and asked the developer to come up with a plan that left Sweetbay where it is.

Staff became frustrated when Pinnacle/Ram did not create a "Plan B" of sorts - leaving Sweetbay alone - because the council originally ordered Pinnacle/Ram to move Sweetbay.

"You have to understand that built up frustration," Bosek said to the council. "We haven't gotten what they promised us."

"We were very conflicted," Peek told the council later on in response to Bosek's comments. He explained that the city's Request for Qualifications called for the prospective developers to come up with plans that moved Sweetbay from where it currently sits. Nowhere in the RFQ did it say there was a possibility that Sweetbay wouldn't be moved.

"We have been bashed for that (lack of a