

Developer's investors give downtown project the 'go'

By Debbie Carson, Staff Writer

TEMPLE TERRACE — City leaders and developers were expected to sit down together Tuesday, March 25, to iron out the last few issues remaining in the purchase and sales agreement that was supposed to be signed the prior Tuesday. That agreement might now be signed on April 1.

It was the next step after hearing from the developer's investment committee that it would allow Pinnacle/Ram to proceed with the project.

"We've been on pins and needles" all week, said Temple Terrace Mayor Joe Affronti last Friday, after receiving word that the city's planned development team will proceed with negotiations.

Last week, a five-member committee met for two days to discuss whether the downtown redevelopment project would be a good enough investment to fund more than \$40 million.

"We're still in a go position," Councilman Ron Govin said. Govin has been serving as the council's point-man in the negotiations.

On Tuesday, March 18, prior to the committee's meeting, Govin told his fellow council members that Pinnacle/Ram's investment committee would be determining the viability of the downtown project and decide whether or not to move ahead with the purchase and sales agreement.

"It's got me scared to death," Govin said of waiting for the committee's decision.

Pinnacle/Ram has until March 31 to decide to walk away from the downtown project without being penalized by the city.

Bob Skinner, a representative of Pinnacle/Ram, had told Govin prior to Tuesday's council meeting that he felt the downtown project is "marginal, but acceptable," Govin told the council.

Already, Pinnacle/Ram has invested more than \$250,000 into the downtown project without any guarantees that the city would sign a purchase and sales agreement.

After the committee's "go" decision last week, the investors are prepared to spend between \$300,000 and \$500,000 between now and July 1 when the city and Pinnacle/Ram hope to close on the sale.

The money, so far, has been spent on staff time, lawyers fees, site plans, engineering drafts, site evaluations and a host of other expenses tied to determining whether the property on the southeast corner of Bullard Parkway and N. 56th Street is suitable for the envisioned downtown project.

Tuesday's meeting between the city's redevelopment staff, Pinnacle/Ram's staff, and each side's respective attorneys was to be an opportunity for both sides to finalize an agreement for the city to sell the downtown property to Pinnacle/Ram and for Pinnacle/Ram to buy the property.

Issues raised on both sides of the table have cost the city and the developer time in trying to work the kinks out.

The biggest hurdle, according to City Attorney Mark Connolly, is language in the contract regarding the possibility of the city defaulting on the deal and how that would be resolved.

Skinner has told the city's redevelopment committee that the issue is a deal breaker.

In essence, what Pinnacle/Ram's attorneys want is to have the ability to file a lawsuit against the city to regain its \$400,000 down payment (escrow) and the costs associated with the project if the city were to walk away from the downtown redevelopment project.

Connolly said that he and fellow attorneys “found the language unreasonable.”

Faced with the issue, each of the city council members said that the provisions in the contract should be equal for both parties – if Pinnacle/Ram wants that option, Temple Terrace should have it, too.

Councilwoman Alison Fernandez said that the issue is rather moot, explaining that once the city signs the purchase and sales agreement, the city can’t back out of it.

“So, it’s not really an issue,” she said.

Other lesser issues in the agreement focus on the Arts and Education Center, in particular the amount of parking needed and its uses.

Councilman Frank Chillura said that he doesn’t agree with the conditions that Pinnacle/Ram is placing on the center.

“It gives me a little heartburn to have conditions on certain uses,” he said, noting that the city has agreed to a \$1.2 million “market adjustment” and other perks to the developer.

One of the uses Pinnacle/Ram has said it would not agree to is a full-time campus for Hillsborough Community College.

If the school wants to offer a couple arts or music related courses or computer training or the like, those would most likely be acceptable – pending Pinnacle/Ram’s review of the request.

Chillura said that the students who attend HCC are not bad kids, nor would they be hanging out, causing problems within the project.

Mayor Affronti recommended that the city, representatives from HCC and Pinnacle/Ram have a meeting to discuss what uses would be wanted and accepted within the Arts and Education Center.

In a related matter, the city is leaning toward a name for the downtown redevelopment project.

Currently, the name under consideration is “Riverfront Center at Downtown Temple Terrace.”

The name came after City Manager Kim Leinbach reported receiving a dozen e-mails from Temple Terrace residents on the matter.

“I think that sounds long,” said Fernandez.

Govin said that the name is long but that most people would just call it Riverfront Center.

Chillura said that the project isn’t on the river, but that in the end the name didn’t matter.

“I don’t care what we call it,” Chillura said. “I just want it built.”