

After July 8 meeting, downtown countdown to begin

By Debbie Carson, Staff Writer

Check Tuesday evening at www.cnewspubs.com/beacon for the outcome of the July 1 city council meeting.

TEMPLE TERRACE — City leaders have finally closed the first of two public hearings required before it can accept the site plan for the downtown redevelopment project. The second mandatory public hearing is scheduled for Tuesday, July 8, at 8 a.m. in the council's chambers.

The second hearing is expected to go more smoothly than the first now that the developer and city planners have hashed out the details of project.

The first hearing took three meetings before the council felt it was ready to close it. The original hearing had been held June 3, during which only one member of the public spoke before the council regarding the site plan.

At the time, the city's planners and attorney told the council that they needed more time to work out the details of the project with Pinnacle/Ram, the downtown redevelopment team.

So the council scheduled a special, early morning public hearing for June 10.

During that meeting, planners and attorneys said again that more work needed be done and the council continued the hearing for a second time.

The third meeting for the first public hearing was held June 25. County planner Suzanne Hicks told the council that the prior issues had been resolved.

"These items have all been worked out," she said, referring to various conditions to the site plan's approval.

One such condition was the footprint for the potential Arts and Education Center the city council must still vote on regarding whether or not it will proceed with the facility. The council was expected to hold a workshop at 5 p.m. Tuesday, July 1, to discuss the center.

Another condition dealt with the improvements to the backside of the Sweetbay shopping center. The developer team has agreed to spruce up the rear of the building with arched panels, new paint, and other aesthetically pleasing elements in keeping with the front of the building.

The council had no questions or comments for the city planners or for the development team, though Mayor Joe Affronti asked the developer for confirmation that the team was supportive of the conditions.

"We're in favor," said Bob Skinner, of Ram Development.

Once the council closes the second hearing, presumably on July 8, and has the second reading of the ordinance, the city has a 30-day waiting period for any appeals of the ordinance. Once that 30-day window is closed, the city and developer should be clear to close on the deal – provided there are no delays with the Development Agreement and the Operations and Easement Agreement.

Currently, the project's anticipated close date is mid- to late September.

Also during the early morning special meeting, the city's leaders agreed to a new financing strategy for funding the downtown project.

Finance Director Diane Reichard recommended to the council that they take a conventional loan for about \$7 million rather than a HUD – Housing and Urban Development – loan from the federal

government.

"I'm in favor of getting the feds out of our knickers," Councilman Ken Hallway said of not taking the federal funding, which has strings attached.

One such string was the mandate that the city would have to pay the relocation costs of the tenants being displaced by the downtown project.

As it is, any tenants who moved out between February 2006 and now in anticipation of the downtown project, will still have to be compensated by the city, according to Reichard. She added that a half-cent sales tax that goes to the city's general fund would be used to service the debts.

Without the constraints and requirements of the HUD loan, which hindered Pinnacle/Ram's ability to some extent to development the site, the council voiced support for some concessions from the developer.

Councilman Ron Govin, who is serving as the council's liaison during negotiations with the development team, told his fellow council members that it would be advantageous to the city by going conventional.

Bob Skinner, of Ram Development, would not speak specifics regarding what the benefits to the city would be.

"It'll probably be better than you'd expect," he said, instead. "We're still working on it."

The firm is developing a package for the city that would make the project more of what the city wants, he said.

"It's a substantial inducement," Govin added.

Details of the package are expected to be discussed at a future council meeting.