

# Downtown Dream Is A Big Deal For Temple Terrace

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The Tribune Editorial Board recently invited Temple Terrace community leaders to discuss a plan to redevelop the city's central district into a people-friendly downtown. The proposal has reached a critical juncture, as taxpayers are voting now through Aug. 2 on whether to raise property taxes by 1 mill to help finance the project.

The participants:

Mayor Joe Affronti Sr., elected last year as a supporter of redevelopment.

Ralph Bosek, the city's redevelopment director and the key figure in putting together the downtown plan.

Russ Oberbroeckling, financial adviser with the Mangin Financial Group and president of the Greater Temple Terrace Chamber of Commerce.

Cherie Donohue, executive director of the chamber.

Eddie Adams Jr., former candidate for Temple Terrace city council, now running for Congress.

Kenneth Tozier, a businessman who has organized a ``Vote No" campaign against the referendum. He lost to Affronti in last year's mayoral race.

Bart Siegel, another resident who opposes the tax increase.

Temple Terrace has graceful, oak-lined streets, gently rolling hills and an artfully manicured golf course. It has top-rated schools and a Fourth of July celebration reminiscent of a Norman Rockwell scene.

It has flourishing communities of immigrants from India and the Middle East. At the city's playgrounds, children who live in luxurious riverfront homes make fast friends with those from subsidized housing. Neighbors would consider it rude not to greet one another on their daily strolls.

Temple Terrace has everything most small towns would want - except a downtown.

What would be the city's center is an eyesore of a strip shopping center. Most major tenants are gone, and a few small businesses are fighting to keep their doors open.

The 38-acre site on 56th Street, where Busch Boulevard becomes Bullard Parkway, holds for some the promise of downtown dreams. For others, it poses too big a risk.

## Grand Visions

Temple Terrace voters are being asked to approve a 1- mill property tax increase - seed money to turn the strip- center wasteland into a bustling downtown district with upscale housing, shops and restaurants. The tax increase would add about \$125 a year to the tax bill on a \$150,000 home.

Voters' approval in a referendum ending Aug. 2 would be the civic equivalent of placing a \$17.7 million bet that others will buy into their vision.

What Temple Terrace aims to create is a New Urbanism- style downtown where town homes line pretty streets dotted with fountains and parks. Envision a new city hall, as well as a grocery, boutiques and maybe a community theater. A park and a museum would anchor the district next to the Hillsborough River.

The city of 23,000 residents intends to issue 30-year bonds backed by the tax increase to pay for new streets, sewers and drainage systems. A private developer would buy most of the city-owned land to build homes, restaurants and shops, leaving the city 10 acres for public spaces.

The payoff for taxpayers could be rising property values and a broader tax base as Temple Terrace becomes more desirable to home-seekers. Wedged in by Interstate 75, the river and the University of South Florida, the city is nearly built out with few options for annexation.

But before anyone turns the first shovel of dirt, the project faces a huge challenge.

Three developers made the city's short list for master developer. Two withdrew, citing concerns about the project's chances. A city-hired consultant has serious questions about the remaining firm's ability to pull off such a large project.

### **Daunting Venture**

Not to be deterred, a core group of community leaders remains optimistic that this onetime golf resort of the 1920s can create a downtown worth showing off.

"Should we be scared? Heck, yeah, we should be scared," said Cheri Donohue, executive director of the chamber of commerce, which spearheads the drive for redevelopment. "But not petrified. There's a difference."

Temple Terrace has been on the road to redevelopment since the late 1990s and regularly votes its advocates into office. Two years ago the city began buying blighted properties.

City leaders hope the redevelopment will generate a stream of property tax revenue to pay for the public's share of improvements. Over the next 30 years, a tax-increment financing district will channel the gains in tax revenue back into a larger downtown sector that encompasses 224 acres.

Letting the dying strip center languish doesn't appeal to anyone, but some doubters are having trouble embracing the grandiose vision.

Few people know the capabilities of Florida's real estate market better than Robert Abberger, managing director of Florida Development Services for Trammell Crow Co. The company withdrew from consideration for the Temple Terrace project last month.

Abberger said the city needs to go back to basics and come up with a more realistic plan for the site in light of today's market. "They need to take off their rose-colored glasses and maximize their existing infrastructure."

But he added: "They are taking the prudent steps to create a very special place." Abberger commends the city for assembling the properties for redevelopment and says taxpayers should support the effort.

Much of the redevelopment concept came, after all, from Temple Terrace's own residents. Invited to public gatherings, they told urban planners what they wanted. The firm, Torti Gallas and Partners of Maryland, gave them colored-pencil visions of trendy boutiques and homes amid lush parks and fountains.

It is clearly a city of dreamers.

The price tag for phased construction over 10 years is pegged at \$325 million. The city's projected share is \$60 million; city leaders are looking to state and federal appropriations and future bonds backed by new tax proceeds to cover the remaining costs.

With more than 800 pricey town homes slated for the area, enough of them must sell to make the project profitable for a developer. There is local demand for high-end condominium housing, but perhaps not for so many units. Fears of a bursting Florida real estate bubble add to the reasonable concerns.

Even the project's lead designer, Neil Payton of Torti Gallas, acknowledges that realistic market projections extend only for the near-term portion of the project, which creates the framework for what will evolve over 10 years or more.

``To be fair, we have no idea if that last phase is ever going to be feasible," Payton said.

That uncertainty leads some to suspect that visions of grandeur are clouding decisions in a community where low taxes and small government are the ideal.

``I'm a taxpayer. I am the one being asked to pay for this," said Bart Siegel, who joins other residents in vocal opposition.

``I just see it as a situation where the philosophy of government is changing dramatically from being a conservative, quiet little town, where basically a mostly unpaid city council and mayor is now taking on a much more robust role," he said.

``That's not what we want."

Another voice of concern is that of William C. Hammontree, a respected former city council member who started the redevelopment ball rolling. In a recent letter to The Temple Terrace News, he lamented that ``everyone's eyes has gotten bigger as the project progressed."

### **Taxpayers' Decision**

Residents are voting on the measure at a particularly vulnerable point for the project. The last developer standing is Unicorp National Developments Inc., the Orlando company that developed a portion of the downtown in Disney's Celebration and the village center at upscale Baldwin Park in Orlando.

Unicorp has never attempted a project the size of Temple Terrace's. The city council is delaying negotiations with Unicorp so it can investigate the company and consider its assurances that it can make the project work.

Meanwhile, Temple Terrace voters are split between those who love Temple Terrace for what it is and those who love it for what it can be.

On a Friday morning at Casey's Barber Shop, one of the few small businesses to survive the decline of the shopping center, Charles Jeffords waited for a haircut. The retired General Motors executive has lived here for 30 years, just two blocks from the redevelopment site, and he didn't think he would make up his mind until he was in the voting booth.

``It's a beautiful place to live," he noted. ``But the people in city council want to continue to expand, and I want to keep the city small."

A few seats down from him was Daniel Bowles, a mortgage broker who was excited about the prospect of a new downtown that would attract young professionals.

Bowles, who has lived in Temple Terrace most of his life and watched decay creep into its core, is working with a developer planning a nearby mixed-use community. Its 75 condominiums and town homes would include moderately priced homes for first-time buyers as well as expensive residences.

``I've watched my parents' neighborhood fall apart," Bowles said. ``I think the redevelopment is going to stop all that."