

End Game: Ram/Pinnacle's Final Plan For Redevelopment Ken Halloway's Blog

Saturday, December 29, 2007

At the December 18th meeting, City Council approved project developer Ram/Pinnacle's plan for redevelopment of the northern portion (north of Chicago Ave.) of the Southeast Quadrant.

With this approval, Ram/Pinnacle presented a time schedule which included contract finalization by end of February, closing on the purchase of the land by July 1, and ground-breaking in the third quarter of 2008. I must say at the beginning that I voted against this plan.

A few of our citizens who were against any plan or any type of redevelopment called me to congratulate me on my "stand", thinking that I had, at last, joined their ranks. Nothing could be further from the truth. I voted "no" because I believed that this plan did not meet the standards of a "New Urban" design; standards which we, Council and citizens, have established and worked towards for the past 5-6 years.

Some years ago, City Council and City Administration formulated and implemented an action plan that would provide for a "Town Center" Development in the thirty or so acres comprising what we call the Southeast Quadrant. This area then, as now, consisted largely of vacant store fronts in a strip mall setting. The Town Center redevelopment was to be in what is called the "New Urban" style, that is a commercially viable combination of residential units, office spaces, and retail establishments, all mutually supporting, in an enhancing architectural style, pedestrian friendly, and intended to give our City an identity apart from a "bedroom suburb of Tampa." New Urbanist is what most of our small towns looked like before the advent of suburban living and strip mall retailers catering to the automobile traffic-and it has been the preferred method for revitalizing decaying and abandoned strip malls implemented by municipalities throughout Florida and the United States. Of course, a development of this type entails financial risk and substantial capital outlay. We worked diligently to reduce the risk and outlay by purchasing over 80% of the land via short-term interest only bank loans. The plan was to sell the land, in one parcel, to a developer with the provision that he develop the property along the lines of a City Master Plan. The incentive to a developer was that he would be able to acquire the entire plot of land at one time, at a minimal cost (our original purchase price), and without the usual code impediments inherent in large scale developments. Had this program been adhered to, what resulted would have been a "win-win" for all parties. But as the saying goes, "there is many a slip 'tween the cup and the lip". Sometime between the original plan and the final implementation, we lost the way.

The Ram/Pinnacle plan that we, the City Council, approved on December 18 is not a City plan, it is a developer plan. The City is no longer the "Master Planner" for this project. Ram/Pinnacle has not agreed to purchase the entire tract, but instead will buy only the northern tier element of the property. This leaves the City with the lower half; and, under the circumstances, I don't see much hope of selling this piece of land in the near future. What is coming in the near future is the due date on the bank loan for this parcel. Compounding our financial woes is Ram/Pinnacle's demand for a \$1.2 million subsidy for building the project. (Council approved this as well). Ram/Pinnacle's plan consists primarily of an ascetically pleasing and well designed shopping strip. As such, it will certainly improve the appearance of the northern tier area.

Naturally, I'm disappointed that we did not stay the course we embarked upon so long ago. At Florida League of Cities we've often been treated to seminars and forum discussions on how some of our sister municipalities redeveloped decaying areas in their midst along new urban lines, and how successful they have become. I had hopes that one day we would be able to contribute to these success stories; but now I believe, that when the dust settles, the only contribution we can make is a textbook case on how not to do a project.