

Blame follows rejection of tax to support \$300M Temple Terrace project

Ken Salgat Staff Writer, Tampa Bay Business Journal

TEMPLE TERRACE -- Now that the city's proposed 1-mill tax increase has been denied, all that's left is the finger pointing. And there's plenty of it.

On Aug. 2, the citizens of Temple Terrace voted 57 percent to 43 percent to reject a tax increase that would have helped fund a \$300 million downtown redevelopment effort.

Leading up to the vote, opponents and proponents of the tax waged non-stop, sometimes bitter, campaigns -- both allegedly aimed at informing and educating the citizenship.

Now, proponents say misinformation and confusion tactics tinged the vote.

"We created an award-winning project that was nationally recognized for its excellence in planning, citizen participation and process," wrote Grant Rimbey, president of Citizens for the Revitalization of Temple Terrace. "In the end, the Vote No crowd created so much confusion about the issues that most citizens didn't know what they were voting for or against."

Bart Siegel, a forensic accountant who openly opposed the tax, said there was no confusion about the issues -- well, maybe a little.

"Maybe a few details got muddled, but most of us did not want to take on such an expansive, risky undertaking without sufficient justification," said Siegel in a letter to Rimbey.

Patrick Finelli, a founding member of Citizens for Revitalization of Temple Terrace, said a lot of people who were onboard early fell victim to reasonable doubt.

Finelli said he believes not understanding the projected costs, the developer search coming down to one developer and people simply not wanting to reach into their own pockets killed the tax.

"Residents got a sensationalized letter in their mailboxes and they responded with an automatic no vote," Finelli said. "The naysayers ran an effective negative campaign, and now we're back to where we started."

Meanwhile, city officials will vote Aug. 16 on whether to proceed with Orlando-based Unicorp National Developments Corp., the lone development partner, or to start the redevelopment process all over again.

The rejected millage increase would have allowed the city to issue as much as \$20 million in bonds to help pay for a 38-acre mixed-use project. Unicorp executives said its previously released plan would have to be significantly re-worked to accommodate a smaller budget.

A smaller and more controlled project is exactly what opponents of the tax were focusing on.