

Temple Terrace Continues Quest To Become Next Urban Legend

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Published: Dec 10, 2005

TEMPLE TERRACE - There have been plenty of raised voices, hurt feelings and dashed hopes in Temple Terrace's quest to transform blighted Terrace Plaza and its surroundings into a downtown.

Despite a failed bond referendum in August to pay for infrastructure and an organized opposition to the overall approach to the project, city leaders and determined residents have pressed on. On Thursday, the Temple Terrace City Council will gather with residents in a town hall meeting to unveil a scaled-down version of the original \$300 million project. No new price tag for the revised plan has been released. It calls for two phases to be completed in six years.

In September, the city challenged Unicorp National Developments of Orlando to revise its original plan using 21 points outlined in a city council vote. The new plan is a compromise and, because it will cost less to produce, it doesn't have the grandeur of the original proposal, said Austin Simmons, vice president of retail development for Unicorp in Tampa.

"That project would have been a signature for the area, the kind of project that would have made people from other states take notice, but some people said it was too grand for the area," he said. "I disagree, but the city is driven by what the citizens want. They have a million different stakeholders in the process. The challenge is, from my side, effectively working with an entity that has a myriad of stakeholders."

When attempting to change the face of a city or revitalize an area with a design concept not everyone can visualize, it's nearly impossible to make everyone happy, according to city leaders across Florida who have embarked on similar projects in the past 20 years. In the case of Temple Terrace, the city envisions a mixed-used development using New Urbanism characteristics to combine shopping, entertainment and housing.

In 1974, a similar plan sparked an outcry when a South Tampa area known as Old Hyde Park was on the drawing board. Amlea Inc., a Canadian-based developer, proposed a 130,000-square-foot project with shops, condominiums and covered parking. Its price tag was estimated at \$20 million.

"There was a huge community resistance," said Pat Westerhouse, general manager of Old Hyde Park Village, who has been involved with the project since it began. "We basically divided the community because of this project. There were many community meetings where we brought plans and designs and made changes as we could."

Along the way, Amlea abandoned plans to have the city of Tampa help fund the project.

"We tried to get city funds, too. We asked the city to build us some parking garages, and they said no. So it was all privately developed," Westerhouse said. "Just now we're working with the city for some traffic calming and on-street parking solutions, but that is the first time."

Opponents of the Temple Terrace project pointed to Old Hyde Park as an example of a New Urbanism project that didn't work, primarily because of the amount of retail turnover and the perceived lack of patrons. Local planners and Simmons disagreed.

"When you look at Hyde Park 20 years ago, that area was a very lower middle-class area with a diverse demographic, and the economics were not extremely strong," Simmons said. "But if you look at it today, the [diversity is] similar to what was there 20 years ago. They are just all wealthy, and the property values are soaring. This kind of development creates an engine."

The essence of New Urbanism is to create a place that can evolve over time and continue to be a gathering spot where people can go and feel comfortable, said Ray Chiaramonte, assistant executive director of the Hillsborough City-County Planning Commission. He described Hyde Park as a "pioneer of the time" and says other communities have followed its lead in recent years, including West Park Village in West Tampa, the Garden District at FishHawk Ranch in Lithia and Celebration outside Orlando.

"When you look back to Rome and other great cities, they all had these great town squares where people gathered, and those buildings have been many different things over the years," he said. "Whereas a strip shopping center tends to outlive its usefulness in about 20 years."

Developing A Main Street

When Sheila Black thinks back to what Dunedin was like 16 years ago, she can't help but smile. She was just starting out as a city employee when a group of people gathered in the late 1980s to promote revitalizing the downtown. Today, it's a homey-feeling hub where locals and tourists visit specialty shops and restaurants and take part in annual events.

"We are all very pleased and very proud because we have become one of the cities looked to by others as knowing how to do it," said Black, now the administrator of the city's Community Redevelopment Agency. "We never really had to have a referendum because we mainly had the support of everyone who wanted mostly the same things."

These days, it's rare to visit downtown Dunedin and find Main Street empty. Between antique fairs, annual events such as the Mardi Gras celebration and a revived farmers' market, there's plenty to do and see. In December 2004, by popular demand, the city resumed the weekly farmers' market in the newly built Pioneer Park at the end of Main Street.

"We have sort of been a victim of our own success sometimes with our bigger events," Black said with a laugh.

As long as people keep coming, the property values continue to rise.

In 1988, property in the redevelopment district had a taxable value of \$32.4 million, Black said. This year, that value has risen to \$82.4 million.

"We have been able to accomplish this by doing small sections and working with our Downtown Merchants Association," she said. "When we first started, we took out a loan for our streetscaping project and also used Penny for Pinellas funds. Now, we are fortunate because our incremental tax dollars are flowing."

Although Dunedin relied on tax dollars and state grants to help realize its redevelopment dreams, the city of Naples worked with merchants to create a master plan and persuaded developers to pay for it. In Temple Terrace, some residents have opposed having city hall, a police department or a performing arts center in the redevelopment area. Naples included civic buildings in its plan.

"Sometimes the city has to take that leadership because the market has not been sufficiently stimulated," said Chet Hunt, Naples Community Redevelopment Agency director. "Government can be the leaders; the

private sector can be the leaders. I think the city is responsible for planning the community and including government buildings, like a city hall and a police department."

From the 1950s to 1970s, Fifth Avenue - then known as Main Street - was home to the primary retailers. By the mid-'70s, much like what happened in Temple Terrace with Terrace Plaza, Naples' Main Street became a place where residents drove, did their business and left. Residents recalled that after dark the street was more likely to be home to teenagers playing football than shoppers.

In 1992, the city established its redevelopment district, and a group of merchants, with help from the city, paid for The Fifth Avenue South Master Plan, prepared by renowned New Urbanism architect Andres Duany. Today, the avenue is home to more than 20 high-end shops and restaurants on the ground level and condos and office spaces on second and third floors. The Mediterranean-style architecture and lush landscaping makes it a premiere spot for gathering and shopping, residents say.

"It's one of the things that drew me to buy a house here after moving from Massachusetts," said Peter McLaughlin, who often brings his dog, Tuckerman, to stroll on Fifth Avenue South.

The Price Of Success

As in Dunedin, Naples' redevelopment has paid off. In 1991, property values on Fifth Avenue South were about \$20 million. In 2001, which is the latest figure in the city's study, the values exceeded \$100 million.

However, the success of the project has made some shop owners nervous about how much longer they can sustain businesses in what has become a high-rent district.

Among the worriers is David P. Loving, a fine jewelry designer, who has been in business on the avenue since 1989.

"I do have concerns about how much the rents will go up once the new buildings come in," he said. "My business is doing OK, but you can only sustain so much."

Businessman Phil McCabe, who owns the boutique hotel Inn on Fifth, was among the original merchants who pushed for redevelopment. He said he invested millions to get his businesses going and isn't worried about others being pushed out.

"I have done well, but you're always going to have people who criticize and say, 'What about the mom and pops?' I say, 'I'm a pop, too.' " he said. "We didn't do this project to subsidize people's rents. These rents may have doubled or tripled, but so have the incomes."

SEE THE PLAN

WHAT: Unveiling of the revised Unicorp plan for the redevelopment of downtown Temple Terrace

WHEN: 7 p.m. Thursday

WHERE: Omar K. Lightfoot Recreation Center, 10901 N. 56th St.

INFORMATION: Call (813) 989-7105