

City Ready To Work With New Partner

By JOYCE McKENZIE

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The city council is placing its confidence in the old adage, "The third time is a charm."

It voted unanimously during a special Feb. 10 meeting to work toward a development agreement with the partnership of the Vlass Group, MJ Lant Developments and Marketplace Advisors. It is a step that could lead to the city's fulfillment of a 10-year dream of creating a pedestrian-friendly New Urbanism-style town center. Two other developers, Unicorp and Ram/Pinnacle, tried but failed to deliver on the city's vision.

Using the joint venture title of Temple Terrace Investments LLC, the group could be the master developer that brings new life to two dilapidated shopping centers in the city's downtown core, southeast of Bullard Parkway and 56th Street. The team is best known for mixed-use projects such as Altamonte Town Center in Altamonte Springs and Atlantic Station in Atlanta.

Unlike the other proposals, Temple Terrace Investments' plan calls for the city to transfer to the master developer ownership of a 19.82-acre parcel to Temple Terrace Developments for the first phase of the project. The almost 20-acre parcel is from Bullard to Chicago Avenue.

In exchange, the developer will build and donate to the city a 30,000-square-foot, \$3.6-million community center that could be used for cultural/civic purposes, perhaps to include the city's library. The city would contribute \$1.5 million toward the ownership of the facility and its land.

City Manager Kim Leinbach said if the library, which is now along Bullard Parkway, were moved to the center, it would free up space to house the police department that now occupies space in City Hall.

It is envisioned that 18.18 acres from Chicago to the Hillsborough River will be redeveloped in the project's second phase.

Michael Vlass, principal of the Atlanta-based Vlass Group, said he hopes to also take ownership in that parcel, where he foresees perhaps some single-family homes and condominiums mixed with retail businesses.

"I think this is a far better deal than the other plans to bring a balance and relieve blight in our city. I've spoken to others in the industry about the Vlass Group, and they've spoken very positive about Vlass," said Temple Terrace resident Steve Culbreath, who works for a building contractor.

"This seems like the plan we've always wanted, as it gives us a sense of place," said developer Bill Martin of Temple Terrace. "You are going to create jobs and also create more of a tax base."

Councilwoman Alison Fernandez said the idea of the city holding on to the property and doing nothing in these difficult economic times would not be prudent. She likes the idea of having a community center where there would be space to expand the arts programs offered at the city's recreational complex and a place where Hillsborough Community College and University of South Florida could offer classes.

"I think in the market right now the plan ahead of us is the best choice," she said.

Councilman Mark Knapp said although he has confidence in the team's ability to produce the town center, he thinks "the devil is in the details."

"Today is a day that will make our citizens' vision a reality," said Mayor Joe Affronti following the meeting.

City officials hope to have a development agreement signed within 30 days. Although under the agreement the developer would have 36 months after its signing to begin construction, Vlass said it likely will start sooner.