

Building Guidelines Questioned

By CANDACE J. SAMOLINSKI csamolinski@tampatrib.com

Published: Mar 18, 2006

TEMPLE TERRACE - Some property owners in the city's 225-acre redevelopment district are questioning whether proposed design restrictions will cost them more while allowing them to do less with their property.

In hopes of improving economic conditions along North 56th Street, the city has laid out a plan that includes design guidelines for the community redevelopment area, or CRA. If adopted, they would govern everything from what color buildings can be painted to how many stories can be included to what types of landscaping, roofs and fencing are required to where parking lots and driveways can be located.

If the Temple Terrace City Council approves the interim guidelines this summer, it will mean big changes for the area now home to mostly low-rent, dated strip shopping centers and aging houses. The city's goal is to eventually have mostly pedestrian traffic patronizing buildings with first-floor retail shops and upper-floor residential and office spaces, along North 56th Street from Temple Heights Road to Riverhills Drive.

For more than 180 people who own property in the CRA, there are questions about how much those changes will cost, whether the guidelines will limit what they can do with their property and whether they can garner the high-dollar rents needed to pay the bills. Rents average \$12 per square foot in the area, but businesses in the district are expected to charge double that when it is redeveloped.

About a dozen people turned out for a meeting with city officials and consultants Wednesday to discuss the guidelines and ask questions about the details. There were concerns raised about having enough of an economic base to sustain the development, since city leaders hope to limit six-story buildings to within 100 feet of North 56th Street's intersections with Busch Boulevard and Grove Hill Road, which will be extended to become Main Street. Six stories is the maximum building height allowed in the CRA. The city also hopes to limit the height of buildings abutting residential neighborhoods to four stories.

"What if I own a piece of property in the middle of the block and I want to build six stories, but I can't because I am not" near the intersection? said developer Harry Hedges. "If you look at places like St. Petersburg, they have 12-, 18- and 25-story buildings with tenants to sustain the development."

Other business owners worried that they would be forced to build two-story buildings they can't pay to operate. The guidelines call for all buildings to appear to have at least two stories, whether actual or through a facade.

"I'm greatly concerned about the economic hardship. I'm trying to see: How can this work in a way where it is not a huge sacrifice now for a future gain? There is not a market today for second-story office space," said Buddy Hurwit, who owns the building on North 56th Street that houses Hollywood Video.

Consistency Questioned

At times, the discussions became heated as frustrations surfaced during the meeting that lasted more than 2 1/2 hours. Among the critics were Ken and Suzan Tozier, who have a long-standing feud with the city about property rights.

"What about the people who live in houses that are valued at \$130,000 to \$150,000 right now? Is it your goal to get rid of them or stymie their development?" Ken Tozier asked.

Redevelopment Director Ralph Bosek denied that the city is trying to force out anyone.

Still, potential exists for the guidelines to force property owners to pay more to rebuild following a fire or natural disaster. For example, chain-link and wooden stockade fences would be prohibited in favor of wrought-iron and PVC styles. New homes and businesses also would have to comply with certain roof and exterior guidelines, such as tile and stucco, that could prove more costly.

The proposed guidelines require a property owner to comply with design standards if building improvements are greater than 50 percent of the current value as calculated by the Hillsborough County Property Appraiser's Office. Anyone hoping for an exemption would have to gain city council approval.

"It should change the area, but the interim is of concern because it has to do with the economic vision of today," said Alexander Ratensky, a resident who serves on the Redevelopment Task Force.

Tozier questioned why the guidelines extend to every property owner except two: "Why did you preclude educational and religious institutions from having to comply with these guidelines?"

Bosek said Corpus Christi Catholic Church and Temple Terrace Elementary, both of which are in the CRA, would be exempt because each has a master plan for development in place.

David Flores, whose company Flores & Harper Construction is working to develop a property in the CRA, also questioned the potential for inconsistency. Although his deal has not been completed, the property he is interested in is a small parcel adjacent to another property in the process of being developed.

"What if somebody puts in a project now? Would they have to follow these guidelines?" he asked. "I'm concerned that we will do this project and follow the guidelines, but next door they will be doing something completely different."

Assistant Planning Director Ann Sheller said there is nothing on the books to force a developer to comply with the guidelines. Bosek said developers of three projects in progress have indicated a willingness to do so.

"We can't make them comply, but we can encourage them to do so," Sheller said.

When it comes to making plans, Hurwit said he wants to know more about where his property stands in terms of maintaining its existing access to North 56th Street.

"I also certainly don't want to have a bank or somebody come to me and want to rent my building and have to worry about exceeding the 50 percent threshold," he said. "Does it mean I would have to close off my driveway? What if I wanted to have a drive-through?"

Parking Addressed

The proposed guidelines would require new buildings and those undergoing major renovations to have parking in the rear and to limit their access from North 56th Street. After some discussion, it became clear the city's consulting firm, Englehardt Hammer, which drafted the guidelines, was unable to answer Hurwit's question. Promises were made to try to resolve the issue.

Bosek told the crowd that the city isn't attempting to strong-arm property owners, and he said the changes should boost their businesses.

"No one is forcing you to make changes," he said. "Rents are not real solid right now in the CRA. The only way to change that is to improve the quality of what is there and create an urban residential neighborhood."

Building the neighborhood includes a vision for 90 percent of the buildings to be in blocks ranging from 1,500 to 2,200 feet long fronting North 56th Street and smaller blocks on the surrounding streets.

Structures would be built 10 feet from property lines, have large windows on the bottom floors and would be required to incorporate Mediterranean Revival, Spanish Revival or Saint Augustine Spanish Colonial architectural styles. That includes tile roofs, which can be double the cost of the shingles that now top many buildings. A paint pallet has been selected, but city officials said there is room for additional colors.

After each of the two prior public discussions about the guidelines, changes have been made to reflect citizen input, Sheller said.

Property owners will have two more chances to weigh in during public hearings, scheduled for April 4 and May 16 during city council meetings. The Hillsborough City-County Planning Commission will consider the guidelines in May. Then, the city council will vote. The interim guidelines will remain in place until the city revises its entire building code, which is expected to take months or even years.