

Unicorp Plan Draws New Criticism

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TEMPLE TERRACE - Unicorp National Development's front man was upbeat when he stood before the city council Tuesday and asked members to be objective about the latest redevelopment proposal, which he acknowledged has not turned out as originally planned.

"I am asking you to look at this plan with an open mind because it's the right thing for your community," Lee Maher said, addressing the council in front of a packed room of residents and city officials.

Three hours after Maher's speech and departure from the meeting, Councilman Frank Chillura made a motion to end Temple Terrace's relationship with Unicorp based on allegations that the company misled city leaders about a lease in a shopping center at the heart of the redevelopment effort.

At the center of the debate has been a 38-year lease held by Kash n' Karry/Sweetbay Supermarkets since 1992. The lease gives the grocery chain control of the space it occupies, as well as veto power over what is done on the surrounding land. Kash n' Karry/Sweetbay controls about 50 percent of the 34 acres the city hopes to redevelop south of 56th Street and Bullard Parkway.

Sweetbay spokeswoman Nicole LeBeau said Wednesday that so far Unicorp and city leaders have done most of the talking to the public.

"I definitely think we have been portrayed the wrong way, and that's because we have never spoken to them," she said of the council and residents.

Maher, Mayor Joe Affronti and City Manager Kim Leinbach met with Sweetbay officials for two hours Tuesday.

Maher's appearance at the council meeting was intended as an olive branch after blistering remarks by some residents, who last week criticized Unicorp's redevelopment proposal because it includes a big-box grocery store and frontage parking in what was supposed to be a New Urbanist project.

Maher even came bearing an announcement that Sweetbay officials want to give a presentation before the council in a month and have agreed to give up the existing lease once the new store opens. Councilwoman Glenda Venable said the city should not have to wait a month.

LeBeau said Wednesday that the presentation could be ready in two weeks.

Maher's words and early departure from the meeting unleashed a flurry of new criticisms. City leaders blamed the developer for not keeping its word; residents blamed the city for not doing its homework and the developer for not living up to its promises of a New Urbanism community.

News that Sweetbay does not want to build a New Urbanist-style grocery store because it will not be profitable, according to Maher, was met with comments from residents and council members that the grocery chain continues to control the redevelopment project.

In the end, the city council agreed to meet with Sweetbay.

Chillura blamed Unicorp for promising to handle the lease, then leaving it to the city to work out.

"We were misled," Chillura said. "We have the wrong developer onboard and we are paying the price."

Residents who addressed the council Tuesday blamed their elected officials for not paying closer attention to the lease. Chillura and Councilwoman Linda Shattles, who served on the council when the city paid more than \$5 million for the plaza that houses Kash n' Karry, said they relied on city staff to advise them about the leases in the shopping center before the city purchased the land.

Chillura agreed to hold off on his motion until Unicorp can respond.

Unicorp did not return calls from The Tampa Tribune seeking comment Wednesday.