

Architect Unimpressed By Unicorp Plan

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TEMPLE TERRACE - Some 3,000 miles separate architect Neal Payton from the residents of Temple Terrace, whose redevelopment dreams he helped put on paper two years ago, but he says he shares their disappointment with the state of the project.

From the Los Angeles office of Torti Gallas and Partners, Payton looked over the latest proposal from Unicorp National Developments of Orlando and was not impressed. However, he did offer suggestions that might save the project and help keep residents' dreams alive.

"I certainly don't pretend to know everything that has been going on behind the scenes, but I do get the feeling the city still has some cards to play," Payton said. "This plan certainly isn't where we started, and I am disappointed because it's a great site."

In February 2004, the city spent \$285,000 to hire Torti Gallas as its planning consultant. The firm spent the summer meeting with residents, listening to their dreams for the redevelopment effort that would transform downtown and boiling down those comments into a master plan.

The New Urbanism plan centered on the site of a blighted shopping center at Bullard Parkway and North 56th Street.

Not all of the firm's recommendations were embraced, such as an 18-story condominium tower, but the plan has remained the touchstone for many residents' vision.

In April 2005, the Hillsborough City-County Planning Commission recognized Temple Terrace and Torti Gallas with an award for outstanding contribution to the community for the downtown redevelopment plan. The award was based on intense public participation to transform the city and create a sense of place.

Throughout the process, residents have been sold on having streets lined with ground-floor retail shops and upper-floor residential and office spaces. The design was intended to calm traffic through landscaping and other pedestrian-friendly measures along 56th Street.

That vision came undone May 16 when Unicorp's latest redevelopment proposal was unveiled at a meeting of the Temple Terrace City Council.

The proposal for the first phase of the project calls for a boxy Sweetbay supermarket with a large frontage parking lot along 56th Street, which would prevent the construction of street-front stores.

"I really don't think that's what people want to see as a gateway to the Temple Terrace project," Payton said. "The first phase sets the tone for the entire redevelopment, and if people are not excited by the first phase, the second phase may not happen."

Unicorp partner Lee Maher said the design proposal is a compromise intended to accommodate requests from Kash n' Karry/Sweetbay Supermarkets, which holds lease options on its existing store in the blighted plaza through 2044. The chain is willing to give up the lease, which controls its store and the surrounding parcels and parking lot, if it can build a new store in the location depicted on the Unicorp drawing.

Sweetbay spokeswoman Nicole LeBeau said Thursday that the company is willing to consider a New Urbanism design, however. "We just need a concept that can work for our business model, as well as enough parking, etc. ... If a New Urban design can work, then great, we're all for it, but we have yet to see a site plan that will work for both the city's needs and ours.

"We have never requested to build a boxy store. ... In fact, our Sweetbay stores aren't boxy at all."

Payton said he can understand why Unicorp would want the grocery store to be in the first phase of the project. Kash n' Karry/Sweetbay would give up its current store, which is on land in the area targeted for the second phase of redevelopment. The second phase is expected to be more lucrative for Unicorp to develop because of its proximity to the Hillsborough River.

Still, Payton said that's not the only option.

"In my opinion, the city could recruit another grocery store and promise to put their sign at the corner of Bullard and 56th and keep Kash n' Karry where they are," Payton said. "Or they could suggest to Kash n' Karry that they keep a limited parking lot on 56th Street, move them closer to the street ... and put their sign at that corner. Then, put the rest of the parking in a garage or somewhere else out of sight. I still think the city has some leverage. It's been done before in other places. We have done it."

Payton's recommendation would keep street-front buildings along 56th Street on both sides of a smaller Sweetbay parking lot.

Sweetbay officials hope to repair their relationship with the community at a presentation 6:30 p.m. Wednesday in the Omar K. Lightfoot Recreation Center, 10901 N. 56th St. LeBeau said she plans to introduce Temple Terrace residents to a different kind of grocery store. Residents have expressed frustration with Maher's assertion that the supermarket chain is unwilling to conform to New Urbanism design, which does not allow large parking lots in front of buildings.

"We don't know if enough people have been into a Sweetbay or seen a Sweetbay, so we are going to show them what we're all about," LeBeau said.

As for the store's appearance, residents should not count on coming away from the presentation with a clear image, LeBeau said.

"That's kind of defining the project, and it's not our project; it's the city's project," she said. "We are going to show them what some of our new-construction stores look like. It's actually a really pretty store; it's not just a box. It will fit, and it does fit into most commercial spaces."

If the Sweetbay store is built as proposed in the latest Unicorp plan, Payton said, he would turn his attention to the architecture along the proposed Main Street.

The Unicorp plan retains an existing Burger King for the remainder of its seven-year lease, and it would include a Regions Bank at 56th Street and Main Street, which is to be created from Grove Hill Road. A post office also would be built facing Main Street.

"I would get rid of the post office there all together," he said. "I would focus on putting storefronts along that street and using that as the gateway. In that case, I think the Sweetbay can work."