

Temple Terrace OKs town center plan

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Last month city council approved the basic parameters of the master developer's plan to build a \$150 million town center, paving a path for an agreement to revitalize 29 blighted acres of the city's downtown corridor.

Under the terms of the agreement, the city will convey ownership of the property southeast of 56th Street and Bullard Parkway to Temple Terrace Investments LLC, a joint venture of Atlanta-based Vlass Group, M.J. Lant Developments and Marketplace Advisors.

The plan calls for three phases of development. The first phase will incorporate property from Bullard Parkway to Chicago Avenue and include a new main street. The other phases are from Chicago south to the Hillsborough River. The plans are for a New Urbanism-style development that will consist of retail stores, residences, offices and restaurants.

Under terms of the agreement, the developer must submit a site plan for the first phase within two years and begin construction within three years. Vlass would have two years to complete the first phase and the entire project should be completed within 13 years.

Councilman Ron Govin was the only elected official who voted against approving the terms, calling them "the deal of a lifetime, just on the wrong side of the table."

Having concerns

Several Temple Terrace residents also oppose the agreement.

Among them is Patrick Finelli, a longtime activist for redevelopment who recently resigned as chairman of the Redevelopment Task Force, a grassroots group of pro-redevelopment residents that formed in 2004 to give input to the city.

The task force's intention of having a representative sit in on some discussions with past potential developers, Finelli said, was generally welcomed but that objective has largely been ignored in the city's discussions with the Vlass Group.

"The problem is there are so many good people in Temple Terrace, some who participated in the charettes nine years ago and helped develop the concept of the plan for the development, who are very concerned about the way it's headed," he said.

Speaking on the issue within the allotted three-minute timeframe during council meetings is too limiting, Finelli said.

"It appears that the impending contract with Vlass is an action of desperation and that the city

council must be convinced that this is the last hope for anything to be built," he wrote in a letter to the council.

One of Finelli's major concerns is handing over to Vlass free of charge land that the city paid \$21 million to acquire.

Task force member Grant Rimbey, a longtime champion of revitalizing the city, said he hopes the city is diligent in securing safeguards against its loss if the developer defaults on the commitment.

"Vlass is probably the most capable developer we have had to date, but he is in this to make money," Rimbey said. "It's the job of the city and citizenry to ensure what gets built is what we want and need."

He also thinks the city needs to hire a development director and an architectural consultant to review the plans set forth by Vlass.

Rimbey also stressed the importance of the city's due diligence by insisting Vlass uncover its current financial status and provide a guarantee that the city would recover the property in the event the developer defaults.

"What are you people thinking?" Temple Terrace resident Mo Rendahl asked council members in a recent e-mail. "The Vlass Group would take the eyeteeth from the taxpayer with this deal."

Rendahl advised the council not to "go one step further" until they have an audited financial statement from Vlass.

"Please tell the taxpayer that your due diligence was more than a hope and a prayer," he wrote.

Govin has some of the same apprehensions.

"I think there is some reason for concern and there remain some unanswered questions staff is working on," Govin said. "I still want to go forward ... but I kind of feel there are some areas of concern that need to be cleared up."

On the other hand, Councilman Ken Halloway finds little fault with the Vlass plan. For the most part he chooses to ignore messages sent from people he labels as "constant complainers."

"We have a good plan and we have a fine developer. He's got the will and the wherewithal to build a town center down to the river," he said. "We've been working on this thing for almost eight years. At last we've reached a developer who's going to do exactly what we want him to do. So let's move forward. If we lose this one, we've lost it all. I doubt it ever, ever, ever will happen."