

Council Accepts Sweetbay's Proposal

By CANDACE J. SAMOLINSKI The Tampa Tribune

Published: Jun 3, 2006

TEMPLE TERRACE - The sense of relief was unmistakable on the faces of the Temple Terrace City Council members and partners with Unicorp National Developments after a presentation Wednesday by Kash n' Karry/Sweetbay Supermarkets.

After weeks of infighting, finger-pointing and hand-wringing about the fate of the city's redevelopment project, which has cost millions of taxpayer dollars, council members, city staff and some residents said they left the meeting hopeful.

The council voted to accept Sweetbay's plan. At Tuesday's council meeting, members are expected to begin discussing provisions of developer Unicorp's contract with the city.

"This was the most critical night for the city of Temple Terrace since the charettes that got this whole process started," Redevelopment Director Ralph Bosek said after the meeting. "I couldn't be more pleased."

However, the mood of the meeting began much differently.

"I was pretty much geared for battle," said Grant Rimbey, president of Citizens for the Revitalization of Temple Terrace, when he addressed the crowd at the Omar K. Lightfoot Recreation Center.

A group of about 70 residents gathered to listen to the Sweetbay presentation with their battle cries at the ready. Some came prepared to defend the New Urbanism dream, which the city council has embraced for redeveloping a shopping plaza from Bullard Parkway and 56th Street south to the Hillsborough River; other residents came to defend Sweetbay's right to stand up for its economic interests.

Prior to Wednesday, some residents and city council members accused Sweetbay of holding the redevelopment project hostage, empowered by its long-term lease at the current Kash n' Karry store in the plaza. The lease, which has renewal options through 2044, allows the supermarket to control what happens to about 50 percent of the property in the plaza.

The city council's vision for the project was to have multistory buildings lining 56th Street, with retail on the ground floor and residential and office spaces on upper floors. When presented with Unicorp's proposal to realize that vision in the fall, Sweetbay officials were not onboard, Russ Lake, director of corporate development, told the crowd Wednesday.

After several meetings, Unicorp gave the city council a new plan in April that partner Lee Maher called a compromise intended to meet Sweetbay's requirements. It included a supermarket with a frontage parking lot and an unobstructed view from 56th Street. The street-front buildings had all but disappeared, and many residents worried that so had their New Urbanism dreams. The city council even discussed ending its relationship with Unicorp, and the plan seemed in peril.

It was under that veil that they arrived Wednesday expecting the worst, said resident Richard Reina.

Sweetbay's presentation began with a video of children smiling and adults dancing outside a grocery in St. Petersburg. Sweetbay's spokesman, Steve Smith, introduced the audience to the grocery chain and explained how the company is retiring its Kash n' Karry brand in favor of Sweetbay, which he described as a "more exciting" product that's aimed at Florida shoppers.

It was then up to Russ Lake, director of Sweetbay's corporate development, to explain to residents why the store didn't jump at the chance to join the New Urbanism dream in Temple Terrace: "We did have some initial heartburn. None of these projects go up without some blood, sweat and tears."

A few residents grumbled as Lake spoke, but then grew quiet as the screen filled with Sweetbay's version of the redevelopment plan. It was drawn alongside the 2004 Torti Gallas and Partners' plan that has become the touchstone of redevelopment for many residents. It included street-front buildings, landscaping, a courtyard and a Sweetbay store that looked much different from the boxy version plotted on Unicorp's drawings.

"Wow," Councilman Ron Govin said.

Work Pays Off

It took three days of nearly 'round-the-clock work by architects Juan Romero and Thomas Henken, of the firm API in Tampa, to complete Sweetbay's proposal. Bosek said he arrived at city hall early Wednesday and was greeted by an e-mail detailing the plan that had been sent at 1 a.m. that day.

After seeing the smiles on many faces following the presentation, Romero said it was well worth the effort.

"We decided we didn't just want Sweetbay to be a tenant in this project; we wanted them to make a statement and be a part of the community," he said. "I just returned from Italy, so I know a little about how these piazzas can unfold. You walked inside and you think, 'Wow, I can't believe all of the things that are in here.' It makes you want to come back."

If approved as shown, the new proposal would position the Sweetbay store behind a line of street-front buildings along 56th Street. There would be a clear view of the store from Bullard Parkway through an opening between Burger King and where the street-front stores begin, Romero said. The grocery store would have a parking lot in front with a courtyard and be surrounded by mixed-use buildings with ground-floor retail shops and residential and office spaces on the upper floors.

Questions Remain

Some residents expressed concerns Wednesday about whether the grocery store would control most of the parking in the redeveloped plaza; others questioned whether Kash n' Karry would give up its lease.

Lake assured the crowd that the existing lease will be relinquished once the new store opens its doors. The parking issue remained unresolved.

Despite unanswered questions, even some of the city's harshest critics said they were impressed.

"Congrats to Sweetbay on the sacrifices they have made; it was more than I would have done," said resident Bart Siegel, who publishes The Pig Report, an electronic newsletter in which he frequently criticizes the city council's actions on redevelopment.