

Developer Says It's Dropping Temple Terrace Revitalization

By CANDACE J. SAMOLINSKI The Tampa Tribune

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TEMPLE TERRACE - The city's redevelopment dreams were derailed Tuesday when the only developer pursuing the project pulled out.

A fax from Unicorp National Developments of Orlando announcing the decision greeted Temple Terrace Community Services Director Ralph Bosek at 8:30 a.m. Tuesday. It was sent by project manager Tim Keen and on its face appeared straight-forward. A second fax arrived at 4:30 p.m.

Despite both faxes, confusion surrounds the company's decision.

In a 3:30 p.m. interview with The Tampa Tribune, co-owner Chuck Whittall said the decision wasn't final and he hoped by week's end to hear from the city about several requests. Bosek said Tuesday night neither he nor City Manager Kim Leinbach were told about any such requests.

"The decision is not finalized, but we are heavily considering not going forward with the project. There are some things we have requested from the city," Whittall said. "We need a little bit more time to resolve financial hurdles in the deal. The city wants us to make a decision immediately. If we can't accommodate their schedule, we think it's best we step aside."

The city had hoped to enter into a contract with the developer by October, when it would present its final site plan and lease agreements with existing tenants, including Kash n' Karry/Sweetbay Supermarkets. The grocery store chain is the primary tenant in a 34-acre parcel, which the city spent more than \$22 million acquiring in hopes of transforming it into a revitalized New Urbanist-style downtown. The plan was to sell most of the land to Unicorp to be developed into multistory buildings where people can live, play and work.

Last week, Bosek spoke with co-owner Lee Maher, who indicated things were on track. Maher echoed that sentiment in an interview with The Tampa Tribune that was published Saturday.

Maher is out of the country, his co-workers said, and was not available to comment on the company's withdrawal.

Mayor Joe Affronti said Tuesday he was surprised to learn Maher left town, considering the company was facing an Aug. 6 deadline to reach an agreement with Sweetbay. In June, the city council gave Unicorp a dozen conditions that must be met in order to stay on the project, among them the Sweetbay deadline.

One of the hurdles facing Unicorp involves Sweetbay, Whittall said. The grocery store chain has an existing store in the plaza along 56th Street near Bullard Parkway, with lease renewal options through 2043.

"Sweetbay, who we were always going to build a new building for and relocate, now they would like \$4 million in addition to relocating them," Whittall said. "It's quite a financial impact on the project."

Bosek, Leinbach and Affronti said Tuesday night that they had not heard that figure from Unicorp. They also weren't aware the company hoped to receive an extension on the time frame issued by the city council to reach the agreement with Sweetbay.

"I think it's going to take an additional 45 to 60 days to determine whether we can reach a deal with Sweetbay," Whittall said. "They do have a legal right to the space and until we can reach a deal with Sweetbay, there is no deal."

Sweetbay spokeswoman Nicole LeBeau said the company's conditions are typical of a business deal of this type. She was not aware of Unicorp's decision to withdraw.