

Council Gets Contradictory Messages From Developer

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TEMPLE TERRACE - A miscommunication by a developer has left Temple Terrace City Council members scratching their heads and warning that their patience is wearing thin.

Are they in or are they out? That's the question Unicorp National Developments of Orlando needs to answer, city council members say.

For more than a year, the firm has been trying to win a city contract to redevelop a 34-acre parcel along 56th Street south of Bullard Parkway to the Hillsborough River. In June, the city council gave Unicorp a dozen conditions that included a series of deadlines that must be met.

The most crucial deadline is Aug. 6, the date by which the developer must have signed a contract with the parcel's primary tenant, Kash n' Karry/Sweetbay Supermarkets.

On Tuesday, Unicorp's Project Manager Tim Keen sent the city two faxes. The first stated the firm would be willing to step aside if the city couldn't be more flexible with its deadlines. The second fax informed the city Unicorp was pulling out of the project.

That wasn't the message the company's co-owner, Chuck Whittall, wanted delivered.

Whittall said Tuesday the company wanted a deadline extension. Unicorp also needed time to deal with a request by Sweetbay for \$4 million, which is the difference between the lease rate the grocery store chain is paying at its current store in the plaza and the higher rent Unicorp plans to charge once the area is revitalized.

Whittall's requests were not conveyed to the city prior to its receiving the faxes, Community Services Director Ralph Bosek said. On Wednesday, Unicorp requested a 60-day extension to meet the deadline for a deal with Sweetbay.

The request wasn't welcomed by most city council members, who said they have lost faith in Unicorp. The council meets Monday to discuss its options and whether to grant the deadline extension.

"The people who are writing these letters don't talk to each other. I would be very reluctant to go into a partnership with people who can't get their act together," Councilman Ken Halloway said. "They are either in it or they're out of it. It certainly doesn't play well with me. I am very optimistic we will find another developer and move forward."

Council members Frank Chillura and Glenda Venable shared his sentiment.

"I feel that we really should not accept their extension. We have already had some developers who have called us and are interested in making a bid," Venable said. "Also, the fact that there was some confusion, that's a red flag. When I heard the news, I said, 'Well, good. It's time to move on.'"

The longer the city waits to open the project to another developer, the greater the risk, Chillura said.

Judging by the number of calls coming into Bosek's office Wednesday, the project is still generating interest.

"I have had several calls today from other developers, including DeBartolo. It's been a good day," Bosek said.

DeBartolo Development of Tampa declined a request for comment.