

Council Severs Ties With Developer

By CANDACE J. SAMOLINSKI The Tampa Tribune

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TEMPLE TERRACE - The Temple Terrace City Council formally ended its on-again, off-again relationship with an Orlando-based developer Monday and will attempt to form a new partnership by fall.

On July 18, Unicorp National Developments announced it was withdrawing from the city's redevelopment effort. A day later, the company changed its mind and instead asked for more time to work on the project.

Unicorp had been trying for more than a year to win a city contract to revitalize a 34-acre parcel along 56th Street from Bullard Parkway south to the Hillsborough River. The project stalled Aug. 2 when Temple Terrace residents rejected a bond referendum to pay for infrastructure. The project went into a further tailspin this spring when Unicorp could not reach an agreement with Kash N' Karry/Sweetbay Supermarkets. The grocery chain is the primary tenant in a shopping plaza that the city owns in the heart of the redevelopment area.

At a special meeting Monday, city council members unanimously voted to accept Unicorp's letter of withdrawal with little discussion. Their attention then turned to the future. Unicorp could not be reached for comment.

Community Services Director Ralph Bosek gave the council two options for moving forward. Members could have chosen to hear proposals Aug. 1 from DeBartolo Development, of Tampa, or Villagio Group, a company formed through a partnership between Chicago-based Jacobi and Exceed developers. The firms submitted proposals last year. DeBartolo was disqualified because its proposal came in too late, and Unicorp was chosen over Villagio.

Instead, the council unanimously voted to accept the second option. The city will submit a national request for qualifications to attract more development companies. Bosek said the process should take about three months. The city council will interview the prospective developer, rather than solely relying on advice from a selection committee.

Councilman Frank Chillura, who vocally opposed Unicorp's involvement for months, welcomed the move. He cautioned, however, against any new developer coming in with plans to wow the council with a visual presentation.

"When Unicorp was here a year ago, we saw a big presentation and it was beautiful," he said. "I'm sure that we have all learned a great deal, and we do know, we hope, now the right questions to ask. We need to ask the tough questions up front."

One question bound to dominate is whether a developer can close the deal with Sweetbay.

The grocery chain's lease at its current store in the redevelopment area has renewal options through 2043. The lease was at the heart of Unicorp's problems, Councilman Ron Govin said, and the concern is it will continue to plague the next developer. The developer will be asked to work with a site plan presented by Sweetbay on May 31 that depicts a New Urbanism-style store.

Russ Lake, vice president of real estate for Sweetbay, spoke to the council Monday. He said the company is willing to work with the city and a developer, but it cannot commit to financial agreements without first approving a final site plan. That was something Unicorp could not deliver.