

Massive South Austin development moving forward

1M s.f. of homes, shops, offices in Oak Hill

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Developers are eager to build a hotel on the lot that holds the building with blue awnings. The historic building would stay put, and a 26-story high-rise would spring up behind it.

Developers of the West Park planned unit development — a 1 million-square-foot PUD proposed in the Oak Hill area — are reducing the project’s footprint while raising its height.

The development, steadfastly opposed by area environmental and neighborhood groups, is proposing to reduce its impervious cover — meaning asphalt, concrete or buildings — from 40 percent to 25 percent of the site, its lawyer said.

Buffalo Equities Ltd., owned by **Rudy Belton**, is seeking “the same densities, but a more compressed project,” said **Dowe Gullatt**, a lawyer at Coats Rose Yale Ryman & Lee PC working the project. The change would result in more open space but would require taller buildings in an area where height is capped at 60 feet.

The proposal could yield a project with shops, homes and offices about the size of Southpark Meadows in Southeast Austin.

Whether the new proposal, the latest in a debate going on two years, gains traction remains to be seen. The developers and neighborhood groups have promised the city they will make final presentations to the Austin Planning Commission in about three months.

Among the concerns raised by residents are traffic congestion, an oversupply of retail, indirect pollution to the Edwards Aquifer and the distance between existing homes and the development.

One of the application changes — which have been submitted but not yet reviewed by city staff — is a promise to implement a phased approach to construction that would curtail construction until necessary road improvements are made, Gullatt said.

Retailers and contractors hoping to get in on the action soon will be disappointed.

Gullatt said the best-case scenario would put the project in front of the City Council in May, but there is no projected groundbreaking for the massive development planned near the Austin Community College Pinnacle Campus, assuming it is approved.

The initial application, filed in 2009, proposed 365,000 square feet of retail; 250,000 square feet of medical office; 200,000 square feet of general office; five soccer fields; a 39,000-square-foot athletic complex; an eight-story, 200-room hotel; a 47,000-square-foot movie theater; and almost 500 residential units.

Reaching an agreement between residents and the developer will require major concessions on both sides, said **Karon Riggins**, who represents the Windmill Run neighborhood association.

Gullatt “said we have gotten 75 percent of what we want, but that is his math,” Riggins said.

Riggins said a large step forward would be assurance from the city that a phased construction plan tied to road improvements would be legally binding.

Although city staff has not weighed in yet on that issue, city planner and PUD specialist **Jerry Rusthoven** said the city has entered into traffic-phasing agreements with developers that are restrictive and legally binding.

The city could and would enforce such agreements, although developers might circumvent them, as one did by going to state lawmakers to overturn an agreement enacted in the 1990s, Rusthoven said.

The City Council considers neighborhood groups’ and the Austin Planning Commission’s recommendations, but it is not obligated to follow them, evidenced by the recent passage of the Park PUD, an office building on Barton Springs Road near downtown Austin.

The council approved that project, by a 6-1 vote this month, over opposition from city staff, planning commissioners and local residents.

Bruce Melton, a principal at Melton Engineering Services Austin and an Oak Hill area resident, said some opponents believe the West Park PUD can’t be stopped.

The proposal wouldn't be considered "extreme" if built in some areas of the city, but it becomes so because it is in an environmentally sensitive zone protected by the landmark Save Our Springs ordinance, he said.

"My feeling is there will be enough outreach that we will be able to allow the West Park PUD to enhance our town center," he said. "I am concerned that what [the developers] want now will detract from it."

Courtesy of JB Goodwin