

Expanded town center project hits roadblock

Bill Arrowsmith is first commissioner to object to city spending more money.

By John Peery
Apopka Chief Staff

The proposed town center project for Apopka hit a potential roadblock Wednesday, December 5, when a proposal to purchase more land for the project was tabled because it didn't appear to have enough votes for passage.

Commissioner Bill Arrowsmith was the first to offer objections, saying that the city shouldn't spend an additional \$3.4 million for 12 acres of land after it had spent \$13 million earlier this year for 18 acres.

"The fact that we are in this (downward-trend property) market makes me skittish," Arrowsmith said. "I don't think it's the right time. We have a major investment (in other property). I think we need to be concerned with the property we own right now."

John Stainback, the city's consultant on the proposed project who did a

study of several months looking at the proposal, left no doubt about his opinion of the project without purchase of the additional 12 acres.

"We need that land. This town center will not happen without it," he said.

Stainback said the \$3.4 million for the 12 acres was "minuscule" compared to the cost of the project and the revenue it will produce for the city.

In his report to the City Council, Stainback said the total budget for the development would be \$138 million with \$21 million coming from the city. The funds for the city part would come from lease payments from the developer, and property tax and sales tax revenue generated by the project, Stainback said.

The biggest expense for Apopka would be in the building of a new City Hall as the centerpiece of the project.

"We didn't go into this with a City Hall component (in mind) at all," said

Richard Anderson, the city's chief administrative officer.

Stainback said a city governmental building would help attract people to

the project, giving the accompanying restaurants and retail businesses ready-made customers.

But, in the conceptual drawings of

the proposed project, the new City Hall is located on the additional 12 acres

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that were not purchased.

The purchase of that additional property is up in the air and, thusly, the town center project.

"We'll see if we can get the commissioners where they are comfortable with it," Anderson said of the purchase of the land.

He said the town center "more than pays for itself" in increased revenue for the city. However, it can do that in only one way, he said. "In order to make the project work, it needs to be bigger."

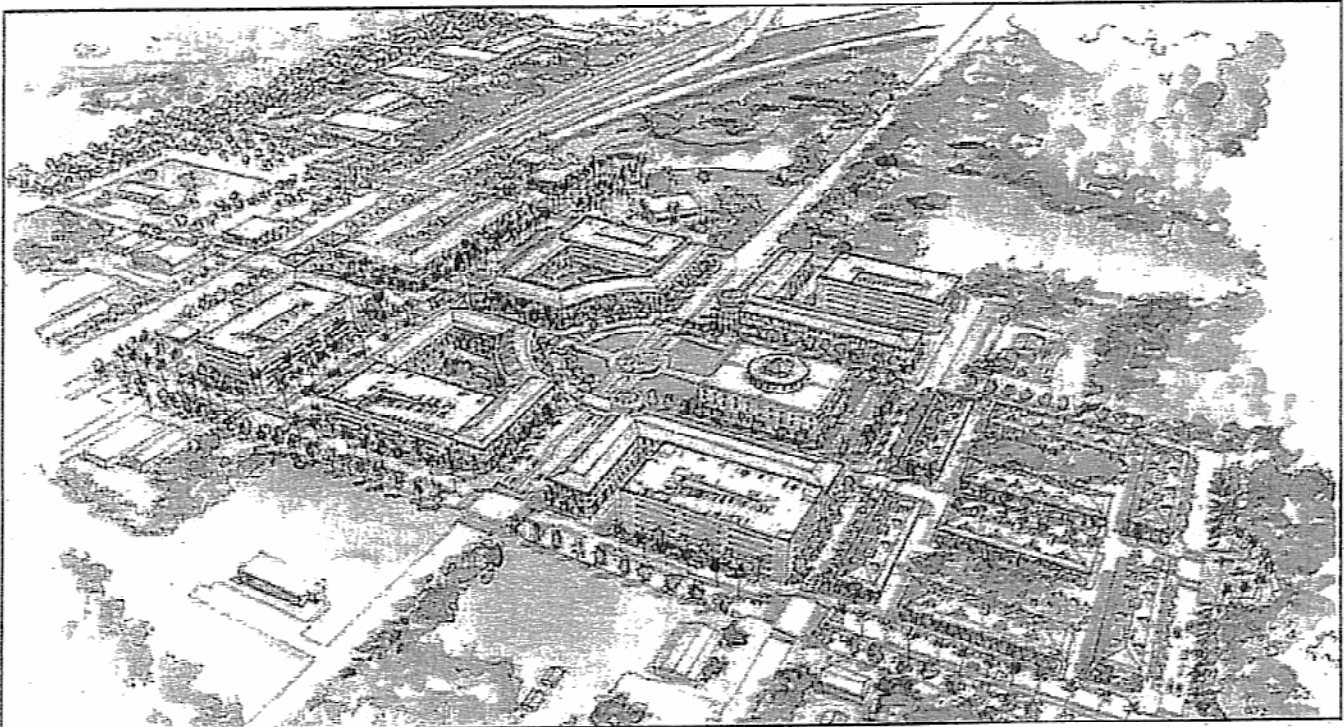
Wade Vose, whose family owns the additional 12 acres and has developed small office and retail projects in Apopka, said his family was "committed to make this happen."

Vose said the land has recently been appraised for \$5.6 million. "It's a good deal for the city," he said. Vose added that his family was willing to sell it for \$2.2 million under appraisal instead of developing it because the town center project is "not a specialty of ours."

The project is proposed for an area just west of the intersec-

tion of U.S. Highway 441 and State Road 436. The city currently owns property both north and south of U.S. 441. The additional 12 acres the city discussed but did not buy is southeast of the intersection of Sixth Street and Alabama Avenue.

No timetable has been set for resolution of the land purchase.



This aerial sketch shows what could potentially be built at the town center if the additional land is purchased by the city.

Our position

Expert: Project needs more land

The City Council took a deep breath this week to ponder the future of Apopka and while that's OK, it appears that the delay in the full implementation of the town center project for the city should be a brief one.

After objections were raised by Commissioner Bill Arrowsmith, as well as Billie Dean and Marilyn Ustler-McQueen, about the purchase of additional land for the proposed town center project, the council wisely tabled the issue and will soon consider it again. Perhaps as soon as December 19, the next regularly scheduled City Council meeting and the final meeting of the year.

Arrowsmith rightly raised questions about the city spending another \$3.4 million for 12 acres of land after it had already spent about \$13 million on approximately 18 acres.

At that time, city officials believed they could successfully build a town center project on those 18 acres, which span U.S. Highway 441 near the intersection with State Road 436.

But, after months of study by John Stainback, a nationally known and respected consultant on town center projects, the city now finds itself in a situation where Stainback unequivocally states that the projects cannot be successful without the additional 12 acres.

Right now, the city is at a crossroads and the five people who make up the City Council must make a monumental decision that will dramatically affect the future of our city. It's not far fetched to say that the council's final decision on the matter will be, depending on what the future holds, a watershed decision for Apopka's future.

There are a handful of options available to the city. One is to go ahead and

spend the money to buy the additional land and go ahead full steam with the town center project. Another is to not purchase the additional property and develop a down-sized project. The other option, of course, is for the city to get out of the project entirely, selling the property it bought earlier this year.

The city hired Stainback for one reason; he is reputed to be among the best in the country at putting together public/private partnerships relative to projects such as this. When the study began, there was little or no way of knowing what the market demand survey would find. The bottom line is that the study found that more land is needed to make the town center project work. Stainback has stated that as fact. He is the expert; his knowledge is the reason he was hired to do the work.

But, it's easy to understand why Arrowsmith and the others raised objections. An additional \$3.4 million from city coffers is nothing to be sneezed at and must be considered seriously.

However, in the end, Stainback's numbers state that the \$3.4 million spent now will pay off handsomely for the city in the future in terms of lease revenue, as well as funds from sales tax and property tax.

One could argue that the city shouldn't be in the real estate or the development business. Those are legitimate arguments, but ones that should have been made months ago before the \$13 million was spent.

Now that the city is fully involved in the project, it should go forward. We urge members of the City Council to make the tough decision to purchase the additional 12 acres. Yes, it's a gamble, but it's one worth taking for the economic future of Apopka.

Redevelopment will support local economy

Editor:

Apopka – wake up!

The city of Apopka is at a turning point. We have an opportunity of a lifetime to fill our city with the vibrancy and prosperity that will come with a new town center.

Apopka citizens have languished long enough having to go out of town to go to the movies, to go shopping, to have

a wide choice of restaurants, or to enjoy the synergy of a public gathering place with wide pedestrian walkways, sidewalk cafes, and interesting storefronts.

We Apopkans deserve the opportunity to stay in our own city and keep our own dollars feeding our own economy. No more having to drive to Orlando, Altamonte, or Mt. Dora to go shopping, to find entertainment

and cultural enrichment, or to find numerous dining options.

The building of our new town center will create millions of dollars of work for local contractors, and will result in about 1,000 new permanent jobs for Apopkans.

The amazing thing is that the new town center ultimately will not cost Apopka citizens anything. Instead, it will result in a huge net financial benefit to

Apopka that will negate the tax losses we've heard so much

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about lately.

When first considering the project, the City Council of Apopka wisely hired the best town center consulting company available in the country – SPPRE out of Houston.

At the City Council meeting earlier this week, the SPPRE representative informed the City Council that after months of extensive research and investigation, they had come to the conclusion that the new town center project would not be financially feasible, and could not successfully go for-

ward, without the inclusion of a 12.8 acre parcel of property – a parcel that had been a part of the town center plans from the beginning. Without that parcel, the project would be nothing but a large strip mall – a result that would not be financially successful, or a benefit to Apopka.

As an owner of the Captain and the Cowboy Restaurant, I know first hand the absolute need for a revitalized downtown.

I have invested millions in my restaurant and wish for it to serve the citizens of Apopka for many decades to come. But our

city needs the new town center project. It will bring many more new restaurants – competitors – but that is OK – it is welcome. When the city of Apopka thrives, so do its businesses.

Please call your council members and ask them to support the town center project, and remind them that the town center project cannot go forward without the purchase of the 12.8 acres of additional land.

Don Green
Captain and the Cowboy
Restaurant

Project is 'Apopka's Manifest Destiny'

Editor:

On Wednesday, I attended the Apopka City Council meeting where the new downtown Apopka redevelopment plan was the main topic of discussion. I would like to voice my approval of this plan and would encourage the City Council members to vote in favor of moving forward with its con-

struction.

As a former resident of the beautiful city of Apopka, I always found myself leaving the city boundaries in search of entertainment, shopping and dining. Apopka needs a venue in which its residents can go to within the city to satisfy these needs that all Apopkans have throughout the year.

This big league construc-

tion project will have nothing but positive economic and social benefits for the city and will help to catapult it to become one of the top cities in Central Florida to live and work in. It is Apopka's Manifest Destiny that this project move forward.

Christian Kelley, President
WorkForce Resources, Inc.