



Flower Mound P&Z approves River Walk

By Chris Roark, Staff Writer

(Created: Tuesday, July 29, 2008 8:13 PM CDT)

Support for The River Walk at Central Park tilted in the development team's favor Monday.

After weeks of various meetings in which residents spoke in opposition to the 158-acre project, those who were in favor of The River Walk actually out-numbered those who are against it at Monday's Flower Mound Planning and Zoning meeting.

Twenty-seven residents, some who are in real estate, spoke in support of the project while five spoke against it.

In the end, it was the commissioners' votes that sent the issue to the town council with their unanimous recommendation for approval.

Commissioners voted to recommend approval of three items involving The River Walk. P&Z approved an amendment to the land use plan to allow mixed-use development. It also approved a request to amend land development regulations by creating the Central Business District as a new zoning district, and it approved a rezoning request from Planned Development, Unit 2 to Central Business District.

The council could potentially visit the item Monday or Aug. 18 to vote on it. With a master plan amendment involved, it will take a super majority vote to approve the items necessary to move forward with the 158-acre project, meaning if all five council members are present, four must vote in favor.

The River Walk is expected to include a hospital, townhomes, a hotel, restaurants, retail and more.

Monday, commissioners heard a presentation from those associated with the project, including developers and representatives of Presbyterian hospital.

As midnight approached, commissioners indicated that the potential for the project outweighed some of their concerns, which included a small number of SMARTGrowth Management Plan violations and uncertainty of if the actual project will look as good as the concept plan shows.

Vice chair Michael Wallace asked for a detailed look at the project's SMARTGrowth violations, and staff revealed three that the project falls short of reaching: arterial collector links, topographical slope protection and environmental protection plan.

Since the project qualifies as an economic development, the town council can allow incentives to waive requirements that fall into environmental quality and community character categories.

That left arterial collector links, or traffic problems on FM 2499, FM 1171 and Morriss Road. But with FM 2499 and FM 1171 being state roads, which are excluded from SMARTGrowth requirements, that only left Morriss Road as an issue that didn't pass.

"Do we vote to deny this project," Wallace said, "with all of the benefits and all of the values, the hospital, the high quality retail, the restaurants, the amenities, the river walk, the jobs, the reforestation ... the revenue tax base and the TIRZ (Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone) impact? "One failure on SMARTGrowth, to me, is not worth denying this."

Commission chair Nick Hollingshad said he was also concerned about the few SMARTGrowth violations, and that if Wallace hadn't asked for an itemized look at the criteria, he would have.

"Although the exemption from SMARTGrowth is here, fundamentally, most of this is in compliance with what is needed," Hollingshad said.

He added that there is a concern The River Walk sets a precedence for other developers to come in and avoid SMARTGrowth.

"As long as I'm up here, this won't be a precedence," Hollingshad said, "but will be a response to extraordinary circumstances that require us to do something a bit differently."

Other comments from commissioners ranged from questioning the amount of water needed for a project like this and the price for the condominiums to praising the incoming hospital and the decrease in the number of residential units from 1,800 to 1,250.

Residents who supported The River Walk listed many aspects of the project they were looking forward to, including a project that gives Flower Mound a sense of community. Some residents fed off a speech earlier in the evening by former Mayor Tom Webb, who urged the commission to move forward with The River Walk and not pass up on an opportunity like the town has done before.

"The property has been undeveloped in the 14 years that I've lived here," said resident David Johnson. "It's in the center of town, and in a way, it's kind of like a donut with a hole in the center. It's similar to a town that doesn't have a soul. Mr. Webb was here to show us the pride of Flower Mound. Now it's time for us to give it a soul."

Others touted the hospital, which would likely be the first component of the project to begin construction. Resident Dick Gordon told a story of a friend who suffered a fall at church.

"When the emergency crews arrived, they said, 'Where do you want us to take you ... Grapevine, Lewisville or Denton?'" Gordon said. "Those were the choices because there is no hospital here. He said, 'I want to go home.'"

Those who opposed the project cited issues such as increased traffic congestion, property liability and damage, and a disregard for the town's master plan and SMARTGrowth.

"This doesn't support the master plan, the ordinances, SMARTGrowth or anything that is Flower Mound," said resident Marilyn Jenkins. "These renderings out here might as well be Philadelphia or New York. They're not any more Texan than I am."

Marsha Gavitt's list of concerns included the possibility of unfilled portions of the project.

"With the current economy, a completion clause should be required from the developer in the event of financial difficulty to ensure the project will be completed and we're not left with an unfinished building," said Gavitt, president of Voters United to Preserve Flower Mound.

She also mentioned concerns about flooding liability for residents that could come from flood plain relocation.

Also at the meeting

Resident Carol Kohankie suggested that a new park be named after Mary Webb, who wrote "Sweet Flower Mound Land", a musical that told the story of a small town in Texas and its growth. The play was performed for the community from the 1970s to 1986, and it won a state award. The play featured all local participants, ranging in age from 4 to 84.

The commission also heard a presentation from the Undeveloped Park Land Subcommittee regarding the Wilson/Carmel/Ruff tracts and the Braden tract near Bakersfield and Gerault parks.

The commission agreed the concept plans were good, but members cautioned about enough maintenance staff or cost being available to keep it in good condition.
