



P&Z impressed with River Walk, but has concerns

By Chris Roark, Staff Writer

(Created: Wednesday, July 16, 2008 12:20 PM CDT)

The push to get the River Walk at Central Park approved by Flower Mound's Planning and Zoning Commission may require a little more convincing.

The major players in the project — the developers and representatives from Red Oak Gas and Texas Presbyterian Hospital — joined a crowded council chambers on Monday during a P&Z workshop session that focused on the river walk's progress.

Commissioners praised the development team for a thorough presentation that detailed many facets of the project. At one point, a commissioner called the presentation the best that has ever come before P&Z.

By the end of the four-hour meeting, though, commissioners had several items they want to be examined before the July 28 public hearing. At the public hearing, the commission could vote to approve the project, which would take the process to the final step, the town council.

The developers have three requests: an amendment of the master plan, an amendment to the land-use regulations and a zoning amendment.

P&Z chair Nick Hollingshad noted a couple of items that reveal a departure from the town's history of development, which he said could be a concern for residents.

One was the residential density, which could be an issue since the river walk could include 1,800 residential units. The property is currently zoned for about 1,200 residential units.

"The challenge is to show that this project is so unique and valuable that the public will embrace the idea of stepping away from that concept," Hollingshad said.

Another was infrastructure improvements.

"I attribute the success and the quality of development over the last 10 years to the master plan and SMARTGrowth," he said. "It appears to me that this project is not addressing SMARTGrowth. There are a number of SMARTGrowth criteria that would not pass. SMARTGrowth has provisions for economic development projects like this one for the applicant to ask for variances from provisions of SMARTGrowth. But this goes beyond that."

Hollingshad also urged the development team to make sure certain aspects of the project, such as conceptual elevations and building signs, end up being as attractive in reality as they are in the presentation.

Among the project's features on the concept plan that will differ from what Flower Mound has traditionally done include an expanded list of acceptable masonry materials on buildings, street side parking, resident units above commercial units, automated parking structures and building heights up to eight stories.

Commissioner Michael Wallace asked about the urgency of the project as it relates to the hospital, since it has been brought up several times during the process. During Monday's meeting, Cindy Slaydon, senior vice president of clinical, quality and operations development of TpHR, said if the town isn't turning dirt on the hospital by late September or early October, the hospital won't be on the timeline needed to move forward.

Stan Ryfa, senior vice president of development for TpHR, told the commission one reason for the urgency was the \$125 million to \$130 million the hospital's bank has tied up into the project.

Hollingshad later asked about the possibility of the hospital being separate from approval of the river walk.

"If (the hospital) was a standalone project, my personal opinion is that it would get the approval it needs," Hollingshad said. "If it absolutely can't be separated from the rest of the River Walk project, its future will be hanging on a project that even though there are many aspects of it I like, there are many aspects that I'm not sure our citizens are going to buy into."

G&A Consultants engineer Bobby Dollak, who was one of several from the development team to give a presentation, said it would be hard to separate it out because everything is connected.

"From the engineering standpoint, it's so intertwined with the river walk itself with the alignment of the water, the sewer, the streets and how it works with the river walk itself," Dollak said. "It's so complex that I don't see how we could separate it out without looking at the whole plan."

Besides the zoning proposal, the developers will also request a land development regulations amendment by creating a Central Business District zoning district to allow flexibility and provide the ability to create unique standards for the district.

The master plan amendment would do such things as: add a "mixed use" definition to the land use plan portion of the master plan and change the thoroughfare plan by removing portions of Eaton Road and Forums Drive located on the site.