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Club Square deal in works

CRA planning facelift to help downtown beautification

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Norman Olson, a long-time member of the Elk's and Eagles clubs at Club Square, laughs at the mention of plans to redevelop the two-block area into a Towne Center.

"I know it's not going to happen in my lifetime," said Olson.

Others beg to differ.

A new Club Square is the centerpiece of the Community Redevelopment Agency's plan for breathing life into downtown Cape Coral. The CRA is touting a concept to replace the uneven asphalt parking lot just north of S.E. 47th Terrace with brick walkways, park space, a parking garage and shops.

Many Club Square residents are skeptical and guarded about the plans. Some see them as the first step toward forcing them out of the area. Others see a renewed square as a great economic opportunity.

A 65-foot flag pole sits in the middle of Club Square, overlooking buildings that represent both the old and new visions of the Cape.

On one end of the lot, there is a power pole, where a dozen phone lines and electrical wires form a black web connecting pool halls, bars and a bingo parlor. Overflowing green Dumpsters and wooden pallets sit under the pole.

Paint on the buildings is fading. Wooden slats along the roof of the pool hall are covered with mildew.

On the other end of the lot is the Omni building, a sleek new one-stop shop for Realtors. It is the clean, two-story vision of the square's future.

John Arnold, a developer from Marco Island, believes Omni is only the beginning. Arnold has given the square plans some urgency after buying four properties, including the Waterford Ballroom, last year. He is not certain what will happen to the ballroom, a popular meeting place in the city.

He plans to build mixed-use buildings that will include offices, retail shops and condominiums.

The square would be built up according to new CRA standards for beauty. Power lines and Dumpsters would be hidden from view.

"We looked at that and seldom do you see a site that can be developed in that manner," said Arnold.

Arnold's plans, and the plans for the entire Club Square project, hinge on whether or not the city manages to build a parking garage on the site.

The garage would have between 800 to 900 parking spaces and could cost \$10 million to \$14 million to build.

The city is looking to combine funds from several sources to make it happen. CRA revenues, lease agreements and a program called PILOP could be used to pay for the garage.

PILOP stands for Payment in lieu of parking. Building owners would pay into this fund. In exchange, they would not be required to build parking spaces on their property.

The proposed mammoth structure, which is a prerequisite for more development, has some square residents concerned that it will also be the first step toward kicking them out.

"They have never made any effort to contact us to see how we feel about it," said Olson. "It would drive us out. We'd have no parking of our own."

The CRA and Arnold counter that no one will be forced to leave. They do say owners may decide to move and still others may spruce up their buildings once property values soar and the area starts to change.

"Economics will work that out. The market force is a powerful force," said CRA director Chet Hunt. "You're going to see some things that don't want to be downtown."

Shelly Cranford, owner of Backstreets Sports Bar in the square area, is determined to be one of the business people who survives the changes.

"I will not be pushed out, but I will conform," said Cranford.

The first step toward completion of those plans will be getting a judge to sign off on the new Towne Square concept. The city isn't sure if they can legally put in parks, a bazaar and a pond nearby. The CRA is hopeful a judge will clarify the city's rights on the property, so that they can move ahead with the garage.

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