

Hurdles remain for Cape projects

New downtown rules first step on long road

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Although the building regulations have been approved, Cape Coral developers still face problems in launching billions of dollars of development in the city's downtown.

The Community Redevelopment Area in the city's downtown must be rezoned, the state Department of Community Affairs registered a concern, traffic and stormwater studies have to be completed and regulations could use more explaining.

"Prior to this we did not have guidelines to plan by," Cape Coral business consultant Joe Mazurkiewicz said. "Now the guidelines are approved. Architects and engineers can turn the ideas into site plans and specifications. A lot more money will begin to be invested in the downtown. Investors were waiting for the regulations."

Samples of the new building codes for the Community Redevelopment Area:

- No new single-story buildings can be constructed.
- Buildings must be at least two stories. Maximums of six to 12 stories also are spelled out.
- The way canopies can be hung over sidewalks and the amount of space a building can be set back from a road also are mandated.
- The codes prefer that parking be put in the rear of a building. But someone can pay into a fund established to build parking garages for off-site parking.

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Although some projects have begun, the major ones that will bring more shopping and restaurants to the downtown may be a year away from getting under way.

The traffic study will be crucial because all the projects will bring more people and cars to a downtown area where parking is limited and Cape Coral Parkway already is bumper to bumper during morning and evening rush hours.

The city council unanimously adopted building regulations for the area on Monday. New zoning regulations must follow to allow for a mix of residential and business use.

Zoning proposals must be passed to allow buildings as tall as 12 stories in Gateway areas and six stories in other areas called Edge and Core.

The height becomes necessary to accommodate the planned increase in residential and business development for the downtown.

The new rules would allow residential development to go from 2,027 homes to 11,126.

"Right now we have a suburban downtown that is nondescript,"

redevelopment board member Gary Aubuchon said. "The increase in height allows us to create the density of businesses and residences to create a vibrant urban village."

Considering that one developer projects a cost of \$400 million for his Piazza di Venezia project, there could be much more than a billion dollars worth of development in the 432-acre downtown's future.

The Piazza di Venezia's conceptual plans allow for movie theaters, offices, condominiums, retail shops, a hotel, restaurants and a convention center on about 25 acres off Cape Coral Parkway from Coronado Boulevard to Triton Court.

The city's redevelopment area sits along both sides of Cape Coral Parkway from Southwest Second Court to Cape Coral Bridge. Plans call for the downtown to take on a city flair with restaurants, outdoor cafes, offices, theaters, hotels and art galleries. All told, 14 projects are planned.

The zoning issue is scheduled to be considered and possibly approved by the redevelopment agency's board at a Jan. 10 meeting.

The zoning changes then move to the Cape Coral Planning & Zoning Board. The board makes its comments and sends the regulations to the city council for two public hearings and a vote.

Those hearings have not yet been scheduled.

Another problem with the residential increase arose from the state Department of Community Affairs. It stated in a letter last month that more regulation on the increase of homes might be needed.

Aubuchon said he believed the concerns are mostly administrative with the department and it should pose no significant problem.

Developers felt the same.

"Until the state signs off on the zoning we can't begin," said attorney Bruce Strayhorn, who represents Tom Cirricione, the Piazza di Venezia developer. "But I believe it is not a major problem."

Studies on traffic and stormwater probably won't be finished until well into 2006. The city has begun taking the right steps, Powell Construction Vice President Scott Hertz said, but a lot of work remains.

"I'd like to see diagrams and pictures on what the board wants. Right now the language of the codes is not the clearest," Hertz said.

Duplication didn't bother Bob Peterson of Island Harbor Construction. His company planned to take its project forward no matter what rules it had to operate under.

"We were ready to take it (Cape Villagio) to the city under the old regulations and ask for variances if necessary," Peterson said. "Everything that moves us forward is terrific. Now it all depends on the speed of the government to get the projects moving."