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Developer likes vision for downtown

Town square proposal in tune with council-approved plan

By JEFF CULL, jcull@news-press.com

It didn't take long for the first real estate developers to buy into the Community Redevelopment Agency's vision for a new downtown.

Less than a month after the Cape Coral City Council approved the CRA's downtown master plan, developer Russ Whitney is proposing a project that mirrors the city's design theme.



ONE VISION OF THE FUTURE: An artist's rendering of a new waterfront town square adjacent to the Veterans Memorial on Cape Coral Parkway. *Special to the News-Press*

Click on image to enlarge.

Hunt, executive director of the CRA. "He could take a leadership role for what happens in the downtown."

A price tag for the project has not been determined.

Whitney's design for the five-acre site — off the Bikini Basin at the entrance to the city off the Cape Coral Bridge — is in keeping with ideas prepared by Dover, Kohl & Partners, the Miami planning firm that wrote the downtown master plan.

Dover, Kohl proposed changing the area from a destination shopping complex into a downtown that makes extensive use of the city's waterfront for dining, shopping, offices and residents. It also stressed making developments pedestrian-friendly and mixing residential with commercial uses.

Whitney's plan fits into that mold, with covered walkways around a basin that is surrounded by shops, restaurants and offices.

The CRA is currently working to implement all the changes the design firm has proposed for the 340-acre downtown.

That means changing zoning rules to allow mixed development, altering building rules to allow for taller buildings and coming up with an incentive plan to lure top-flight developers.

Hunt said he expects to keep with the CRA's aggressive schedule and have the zoning changes approved by the city in late summer.

Whitney said he'd get his project moving "as quickly as they can pass the zoning."

Government officials are also expected to be looking at the area to see what accommodations can be made to keep developers such as Whitney interested in building downtown.

He recently unveiled plans to convert the Avalon Engineering building at the corner of Cape Coral Parkway and Waikiki Avenue into a town square with shopping, restaurants, offices, and a convention center. Whitney owns the building.

Whitney, president of Whitney Education Group Inc. in Cape Coral, said that he had considered putting an office tower on the site but now he's "buying into the CRA's downtown master plan."

He added that he wants to put an element of waterfront into the development to complement the city's waterfront image. He's proposing a central basin that would connect with Bikini Basin to the east and would be open to the public.

"It would be a wonderful project," said Chet Hunt, executive director of the CRA. "He could take a leadership role for what happens in the downtown."

"We've got to work out some breaks for things like water retention areas," said Councilwoman Alex LePera.

Hunt said the CRA will be looking at ways to defer some property taxes on new developments, assist with obtaining permits and add codes that will provide "some relief."

In the end, those incentives should be enough to attract quality developers with projects similar to Whitney's, Hunt said.

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