



Council hears from Greenfire supporters

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DURHAM -- A City Council that earlier this week postponed a decision on an incentives package for Greenfire Development's \$284 million downtown plan heard Thursday from business leaders and investors who favor the project.

Officials from Downtown Durham Inc. and the Greater Durham Chamber of Commerce made it clear they think Greenfire can deliver the 240,000 square feet of prime office space, 70,000 square feet of stores and restaurants, 150 hotel rooms, 430 units of housing and 1,700 parking spaces it has promised.

They also said they have confidence that bankers and city administrators will provide the scrutiny necessary to ensure that the project makes economic sense.

"We've been through this before," during preparations for projects like the American Tobacco complex, said Ted Conner, the chamber's vice president of economic development. "I have a lot of confidence that all the right answers are going to be developed."

Greenfire officials, meanwhile, made a point of trotting out some of the people who've already invested in the project and a representative of an Atlanta firm that's poised to do so. Their move answered a challenge from Mayor Bill Bell, who said Monday that he wanted to know more about who's financing the project.

The group of investors who showed up included Durham native and former National Football League, N.C. State University and Northern High School football star Dewayne Washington, who said downtown needs more investment because it's still as full of "dark buildings" as it was when he was growing up here in the 1980s.

"Why not Greenfire? Why not now?" Washington asked the council. "If not now, when and who? If we don't make these decisions, we'll be here 10 years from now with the same decisions with another developer."

The potential investor unveiled Thursday was The Integral Group LLC, an Atlanta company known in business circles for its involvement in one of the first redevelopments of public housing tied to the federal government's Hope VI program.

One of its vice presidents, Daryl Jones, told council members the company decided about a year ago that it wants to get into the North Carolina market and is focusing its attention on Durham and Winston-Salem.

The firm intends to become a co-developer of Greenfire's project and will put capital into the effort, Jones said, adding that the two firms have not yet officially signed a deal.

Jones also sought to blunt the worries of some council members that the bursting of the country's housing bubble makes Greenfire's project unusually risky. He voiced confidence that the market will bounce back.

"We are in a cycle right now," he said. "But taking a much longer-term vision, we think we're going to be in a good position when the market cycles back. We are in close contact with the capital markets and there are still deals getting done if you have good sponsors and projects. And that's what you have here."

Thursday's turnout in support of the project was important politically because the \$20 million incentive package city officials have assembled for Greenfire has drawn fire from some local business interests.

The skeptics include members of the DDI board like architect John Warasila and developer Andy Rothschild.

Greenfire's plan -- especially its proposed redevelopment of three city parking facilities -- also has merchants and church groups worried about construction-related disruptions.

One of the firm's lead partners, Carl Webb, assured council members that Greenfire is in talks with officials at Trinity United Methodist Church and the owners of at least one downtown restaurant about alternative parking arrangements.

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