



City backs downtown plan

By Ray Gronberg : The Herald-Sun
gronberg@heraldsun.com

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DURHAM -- A unanimous City Council on Monday endorsed the proposed framework of an incentives deal that would underwrite Greenfire Development's \$284 million downtown plan.

The vote followed about a month of review, and an intense behind-the-scenes effort to allay concerns voiced by some rival developers. But there was no real doubt, in the days leading up to Monday's vote, that the council would back the project.

City officials are pledging up to \$20 million in cash and three public parking facilities to the effort, provided Greenfire can line up the rest of the financing it needs to build 240,000 square feet of office space, 70,000 square feet of stores and restaurants, 150 hotel rooms, 430 units of housing and 1,700 parking spaces.

There's "no question, as complex as this project is, if it's done right it could be a real boon for this community and this city," Mayor Bill Bell said in support of the incentives package.

Monday's vote isn't the council's last word on Greenfire's plan, as it only clears the way for Durham's Office of Economic and Workforce Development to negotiate a contract that would formalize both the developer's promises and the city's offer.

City Manager Patrick Baker said the contract could be ready for council review as early as June.

Most of the questions that have come in the weeks since details about Greenfire's plan and the city's incentive package surfaced have focused on whether the home-grown development company can deliver on its ambitious plan. Skeptics have also wondered about the rationale for the city allowing the firm to redevelop a parking deck on West Chapel Hill Street and two surface lots.

City officials have countered the first by arguing that a firm that raised roughly \$60 million to buy the SunTrust tower and many other key properties is likely to continue having access to capital.

Meanwhile, Greenfire officials managed to convince a key skeptic, local developer Andy Rothschild, to endorse the plan last week. Rothschild's move followed no fewer than five meetings with counterparts at Greenfire, sources said.

But despite the multipronged lobbying, some of the worry about the project remained.

Local architect John Warasila told council members his concerns about "transferring public property to the private sector" stem from the fact Greenfire and city officials hammered out the plan in private.

As the two sides go forward, "There needs to be a process for gathering public input, and the ideas that come forward need to be implemented in some way," he said.

Warasila added that city officials should see to it that Greenfire halts its aggressive property-acquisition effort and concentrates instead on carrying out its construction plan.

Another downtown property owner, Sean Cunningham, echoed Warasila's complaint about the behind-the-scenes nature of the talks between city and Greenfire officials.

"The veil of secrecy that led up to this announcement needs to come off, and there needs to be more public involvement," Cunningham said.

Council members agreed that starting with the impending contract, they'll insist that officials brief the public on the deal before they put it on the council agenda for a vote.

Bell said his main concern about Greenfire's plan, in contrast to the American Tobacco complex and other incentive-driven projects of recent years, is that there could be significant turnover among both administrators and elected officials before the work is done.

He didn't say exactly who he's figuring will leave, but many area political activists assume the mayor himself intends to step down after his current term expires next year.

Baker is stepping down as manager this summer, and officials worry that Assistant City Manager for Economic and Workforce Development Alan DeLisle is a top target for personnel recruiters from other cities.

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