

# St. Petersburg Times

JOSH ZIMMER. *St. Petersburg Times*. St. Petersburg, Fla.: Aug 8, 2005. pg. 4

As voting drew to a close Tuesday, the city's tax-raising referendum struggled for support.

Approval would allow the city to raise property taxes by 1 mill, raising up to \$20-million in bonds for a massive redevelopment project on 38 acres off N 56th Street and Bullard Parkway. But despite a passionate campaign by city officials and activists, most voters weren't buying the argument that they needed to pay for new roads, parks and other infrastructure.

"My property taxes are already high enough," Debbie Basquit said after voting against the referendum.

Vernon Goshern agreed. "Every day you get up, it's more money," said the retired boiler worker, who lives on a pension, Social Security and "lots of medications."

Goshern criticized the project's estimated cost of \$325-million and the fact that only one potential master developer remains when there had been three finalists. The other two finalists dropped out, concerned about the project's financial viability.

Turns out Basquit and Goshern were the tip of the iceberg. The referendum, considered a linchpin of the city's redevelopment effort, went down in a stunning defeat, losing 57 percent to 43 percent.

Supporters were admittedly shell-shocked.

Many assumed the referendum would win. City Council member Ron Govin, for example, boldly predicted that 65 percent of voters would "do the right thing" and approve it.

"It went down in flames," said Pat Finelli, a University of South Florida professor who heads the city's Strategic Teamwork and Revitalization Committee, a citizens advisory group picked by the City Council.

Backers pointed angry fingers at the opposition, which conducted a relentless campaign replete with bright red "Vote No" signs and negative mass mailings. At least one Web site, run by former mayoral candidate Ken Tozier, provided a steady stream of criticism.

Fair or not, the effort successfully raised doubts about the city's plan.

"I think the message people sent Tuesday is they don't want their ad valorem taxes paying for redevelopment," said Ralph Bosek, the city's community development director.

All along, supporters had no Plan B. Now they are scrambling to put one together, but they say it may take weeks or months to do so.

The city also may have to ditch all, or part, of its vaunted redevelopment plan.

Hoping to devise the ideal project, the city brainstormed last year with residents. A nationally known planning firm, Torti Gallas and Partners, put together an upscale, mixed-use concept for the area. The vision included hundreds of homes and several hundred thousand square feet of stores and offices.

What's more, supporters envisioned creating a town center. A community focal point, it called for a new city hall, riverfront park and performing arts center.

Along the way, officials set up a rigid developer selection process.

A list of 10 applicants was whittled down to three finalists. But only one finalist, Orlando-based Unicorp National Developments, stayed in the mix.

Before Tuesday's referendum, the city appeared close to making a decision on Unicorp's 10-year, \$325-million proposal.

Now there's no consensus on how to proceed. Should the city stick with Unicorp, or should it step back and explore other options, including downscaling the project and seeking new bids?

At a special meeting of the Strategic Teamwork and Revitalization Committee Thursday, Finelli urged the city to let its financial adviser, John Stainback, continue talking with Unicorp in an effort to nail down projected revenue from the project for the company and the city. The city has spent \$20-million acquiring 35 acres at the site. But it remains unclear how much Unicorp would pay for the land and how much tax revenue the city stands to gain.

Committee member Ken DeVane urged the city to seek out other developers. A financial adviser, he even recommended one: the Cordish Co. of Baltimore.

"As of Tuesday night, I think we're at square one," he said.

But most members sided with Finelli.

"We can't panic . . . and sell the farm to the first deep-pocketed developer that comes along," he said.

Unicorp says it remains interested in the project, adding that it would need to be changed.

However, there are signs that even city officials are willing to veer from the process they set up. There's talk about meeting with the community in an effort to fully grasp the reasons for the referendum's failure. In addition to rejecting higher taxes

for such a grandiose project, people may have been troubled by traffic concerns and the idea of spending public money to help a private developer who stands to profit.

"I think there was a lot of confusion," council member Govin said. "But nonetheless . . . we have to step back and look at it. It's probably going to take a little while to do that."

For months, council member Frank Chillura wanted to slow down the process, citing the loss of two finalists and uncertainty surrounding the city's costs and revenue. Now, the crowd may be moving in his direction.

The City Council will discuss its options at a special meeting Tuesday at 11 a.m.

"Better take time and do it right, than rush and it be a failure," Chillura said. "What's months at this point?"

Mitch Peterson, a retired teacher from Minnesota, said city officials and activists were far too ambitious from the get-go.

"The people don't want to pay taxes for this monster," he said. "I don't need a city hall. We don't need another park. We don't need to spend (millions) on a performing arts center. That's good retail space.

"We don't need Mayberry," he continued. "Temple Terrace has a lot of average hard-working people. We're not the kind of people who want to go down there and walk down memory lane."

Tozier, a businessman who lost a run for mayor in November while opposing the city's redevelopment plan, likened Temple Terrace to a suburban community. He said the city's town center concept doesn't fit.

"There's plenty of urban space, if you want it," Tozier said, referring to Tampa.

Throwing out his own dose of caution, Bosek, the city's community development director, said the city cannot wait too long to develop the property. By 2008, the city will owe money on the bonds it issued while buying up individual parcels.

"We bought \$20-million worth of property," he said. "We've got bills coming due."