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NEWS

City and developer preparing to negotiate on downtown project

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Too little foot traffic, too many storefronts with for rent signs in the windows.

People might argue the causes of downtown Auburn's problems, but no one argues that it should not be vibrant again.

City officials hope Auburn Junction, Alpert International's sprawling redevelopment proposal between the Sound Transit Station, City Hall and Safeway could make that happen. Last week the Downtown Redevelopment Committee met with company president Spencer Alpert to talk about upcoming negotiations.

Auburn has decided to negotiate with Alpert rather than the Stratford Group, which submitted a more modest scheme in response to the city's request for proposals.

The Auburn City Council is expected to adopt a resolution at its regular meeting next Monday, formalizing the city's intent to negotiate with Alpert. Either party might walk away during that 90-day period, but the outcome could be a binding development agreement.

While the City of Auburn owns 2.17 of the 5.39 acres needed to create Auburn Junction, numerous third parties own the rest, including the Crites-Huff and the Marvel Grocery blocks directly south of City Hall. Alpert will need to acquire this property and more at some point if the project is to work.

But how likely is it that all those parcels would be in hand at the close of the negotiation period? And how far can anybody go to plan such a complex project without all the parcels in hand?

"It would be great if in 90 days we got all these property owners under contract for simultaneous closing at the same time with the city property, but probably not", Alpert said. "It may simply be that we are in negotiations or we have a strategy that's common."

"... I've never seen anything like this", Alpert added. "It has a lot of moving parts."

Many details would have to be worked out during the negotiating period, include phasing requirements, conditions and restrictions in the design guidelines, and the city's financial participation, which could include full or partial funding of the promenade, the plaza, public parking structures and other public use facilities or none at all.

"We have said we don't need a nickel from the city, that would be great. We would be delighted, and I'm sure you especially would be delighted," Alpert said, adding "that if the city finds it has to participate to make the project viable, and that doing so would make economic sense, its participation would be welcomed."

Councilwoman Lynn Norman sought assurance that Auburn Junction would include residential space.

“When (the City of Kent) started Kent Station, it was supposed to be a mix of residential and commercial”, Norman said. “Then we were told that they couldn’t come to an agreement between the residential and commercial side of it and decided to do it in phases, and residential would be the next phase. And they are still waiting. The council here has been really committed to having a residential component in developing the downtown core.””

“The Kent Station killed downtown Kent”, said Councilman Gene Cerino. “It’s a project we can learn from. But if this isn’t an urban project, if it doesn’t bring people who are there permanently into the area, then it is not going to accomplish one of our major goals, which is to maintain what is already here.”

Alpert assured committee members that the residential aspect is key, and that the promenade and greenways were conceived expressly to connect the project with the downtown in ways that Kent Station, two blocks north of downtown Kent, does not.

Mayor Pete Lewis said the fundamental question before the city is whether its aim is to create a successful retail center that returns value to the city, or a place that’s going to meet the needs of an aging demographic in the core of downtown, or perhaps a combination.

“You are going to have to have those stores if it is to be successful. You will need input from the retailers,” Lewis said.

Councilwoman Sue Singer said constituents have stopped her on the street to express their concerns.

“I have talked to a lot of people, and they are scared that the city is going to screw this up,” Singer said. “People have been asking me a lot of questions, and they want to know more. They want to protect the historical part of downtown, so we don’t lose our flavor.”

Singer said afterward that the city went to great lengths in its due diligence on Alpert International.

“What happened with the Cavanaugh project has made us all paranoid,” Singer said.

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