

Auburn officials choose downtown developer

05/12/2008

Source: Business Examiner

Author: Paul Schrag

City of Auburn officials have chosen Dallas-based Alpert International to help craft what city officials hope will be a brand-new downtown.

Most recently known for flirting with a Donald Trump-funded high rise project in Seattle, President and CEO Spencer Alpert said his company will make the most out of its one-year, exclusive negotiating agreement with Auburn.

If a development agreement can be reached, the plan would be to break ground on a massive mixed-use center called Auburn Junction. The project would include a host of residential components, with ground floor retail beneath.

City officials envision building heights of four to five stories tall. The current downtown record is three stories. When completed, the project would encompass four city blocks.

"We've told the city that we'd like to do it with an old-style, red brick-type look," said Alpert. "We want to feed into the history of Auburn as a railroad community."

Despite the current credit crunch, Alpert is convinced that the market will right itself in time to move forward with the project full force. When the time comes, Alpert has assembled a blue-ribbon team of consultants to help. On board, for example, is Callison Architects of Seattle - one of United States' ten largest architectural firms.

Also on board are Seattle-based mechanical consultants McKinstry Co. and mixed-use development consultants, Portland-based Williams and Dame, best known for its redevelopment of the city's Pearl District. Of the four major companies involved,

both Alpert and Williams and Dame have been vying to get into the South Sound in a big way. Alpert International was one of three finalists to build the City of Federal Way's new city center project, which was awarded to Vancouver, B.C.-based United Properties. Williams and Dame recently pulled the plug on plans to renovate Tacoma's historic Elks Lodge, citing lack of financing as the chief reason.

These three companies will help Alpert incorporate its vision for an ecologically sustainable mixed-use community, which will feature everything from rain capture systems to composting if Alpert has his way.

Meanwhile, Alpert is working to acquire the remaining property his company needs to complete the vision. Currently, the City of Auburn owns 40 percent of the needed land, with the remainder split between a few downtown property owners, including long-time business owner Pat Cavanaugh, and Seattle's The Stratford Co.

"We are in negotiations now, and are hoping to acquire the property we need," said Alpert. "Auburn has all the potential in the world, but nobody comes downtown unless they have a specific purpose. We're hoping we can change that."

Meanwhile, Auburn Regional Medical Center has announced it is finally moving forward with plans to build a parking garage near Auburn City Hall that will include 149 public stalls. The imminent parking expansion removes a key barrier to several projects, which depend on those parking stalls to satisfy permit requirements before moving forward. City officials are also nearing an agreement with Los-Angeles-based Robertson Properties Group to build a 66-acre, 733,000-square-foot retail megaplex on the site of Auburn's former Valley Six Theater. Though nothing has been officially committed to paper, concepts include mixes of boutique retail, restaurants, national retail anchors, residential above retail and some hospitality offerings.