



THE PLAIN DEALER

Dueling developers plan Solon shopping centers

City pledges it will not use eminent domain powers

Tuesday, October 02, 2007

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Plain Dealer Reporters

Solon- Two of Northeast Ohio's largest developers are racing to build separate upscale shopping complexes in a city craving retail.

Only one will win.

The Coral Co. on Monday night gave the City Council a glimpse of its plans for a \$500 million shopping complex along SOM Center Road.

In two weeks, Stark Enterprises Inc. will go to the council with a plan to build on a site that is expected to be twice the size of the current Crocker Park, which it developed in Westlake.

The city said it refuses to use eminent domain to help build retail.

For Coral Co., that means it must negotiate with land owners in an attempt to purchase 70 homes and handfuls of businesses between Bainbridge and Solon roads valued at about \$27 million, according to Cuyahoga County auditor's records. About three of every four parcels are residential, the records show.

In two weeks, Stark Enterprises Inc. will unveil plans for a 75-acre retail and residential complex.

Stark Enterprises President Robert Stark said he wants to build at the Solar Center, a shopping center that includes a Giant Eagle grocery store at the southeast corner of Ohio 43 and Ohio 91.

His proposal would include two department stores, a hotel, homes and retail outlets, as well as business offices.

And unlike Coral's idea, Stark's plan calls for no homes to be torn down.

Stark's portfolio includes Eton: Chagrin Boulevard in Woodmere, The Strip off Portage Road in Canton and developments in Cleveland's Warehouse District.

Solon has long sought out retail outlets to boost its economy, but officials doubt the city can handle both projects. Mayor Kevin Patton expects Solon City Council to choose only one of the two.

"Each of us believes that we have a viable project," said Coral President Peter Rubin. "In the end, we'll see what happens. One of us may go forward, or neither of us might. You never know."

Rubin's 90-acre plan includes a department store, a cinema, a hotel, offices and 500 residential units - from ranch houses to townhouses - as well as an arts district. It also would have a 2.5-acre park.

Some residents along West Sharondale and Sharondale drives - in the heart of the proposed Coral Co. development - are balking at the plan, and they say they don't want to sell their homes.

"Quite frankly, I think it's sort of dumb," said Carol Holub, 75, who lives on West Sharondale with her son, Doug, and cat, Cinderella, in a home where she raised seven boys.

"Just to come in and take out a whole neighborhood is something I don't understand. [The neighborhood] is kind of country in the city."

But others disagree.

"I once said that they would carry me out of this house with my toes pointed up," said Ed Peace of Jaclyn Drive, where he has lived since August 1965. "That might not happen now. I don't want to hold up progress, as long as the price is right."

Each developer wants to bring his plans before the Solon Planning Commission and the council. If one or two plans sail through, residents would vote on rezoning issues on the March ballot.

Though some believe that might be overly ambitious, Stark said he will push hard to be on the ballot.

In Rubin's case, if the property is rezoned, construction would begin next year, with the first phase finished by 2010. The entire project would be finished by 2013.

Stark's plans will be discussed further in the coming weeks.

Rubin already has begun extensive negotiations with some of the businesses on the proposed site. Some property owners said Ruben's company is offering as much as \$400,000 per home.

"If we have to reconfigure, we will," he said. "We're hoping to speak with homeowners and discuss the issue. We don't have a magic wand that we can wave."

While the city welcomes an upscale retail center, it shies away from using eminent domain - the right of the government to obtain a person's land by purchasing it.

"The city has never used eminent domain," said Rob Frankland, Solon's director of planning. "The developer will have to come to an agreement with property owners because the city will not step in."

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