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Fort Lauderdale weighs expansive beach project at Bahia Mar

Proposal calls for demolishing and replacing a four-story hotel with a 22-story, 300-room Waldorf-Astoria; the 15-story Bahia Mar hotel would be renovated; two new condo towers, 21 stories tall, would be built

By Brittany Wallman
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FORT LAUDERDALE

"Impressive." "Seductive." And divisive. A developer's proposal for high-rise condos and a Waldorf-Astoria hotel on public land at the beach is so expensive and glamorous, even some of its detractors talk about it as if it's irresistible.

The peninsula off Seabreeze Boulevard that's home to the annual boat show and to the Bahia Mar Resort and Yachting Center is not very inviting now, many agree. But the city must decide: Is the \$500 million proposal called Bahia Mar Park too much development? And would taxpayers benefit enough to justify it?

City officials gave Bahia Mar Park a tepid response last Tuesday.

One of the largest development proposals ever on city land, the proposal from LXR Luxury Resorts has entered the final stretch. The city's Planning and Zoning Board will vote on the site plan tonight. The City Commission is expected to vote later this year.

Here's what's on the table now: LXR, which already leases the property from the city, wants to extend its lease to a total of 99 years. A four-story hotel would be demolished and replaced with a 22-story, 300-room Waldorf-Astoria. The 15-story Bahia Mar hotel would be renovated. Two new condo towers, 21 stories tall, would be built. They'd be Waldorf-Astoria Residences, and sold with 99-year leases.

The city would share in the profits. With the added development, LXR estimates the city would glean an extra \$391 million during the term of the existing lease, which runs until 2062. And the city would get about \$2 billion in revenues from 2062 until the lease runs out in 2106, according to the developer's estimate.

Developer Peter Henn of LXR gave an example of how a condo sale would work, and what it would mean to taxpayers: A buyer might pay \$2 million for a 2,000-square-foot unit on a 99-year lease, and the city would get 4.25 percent of that, or \$85,000. The buyer then would pay a ground lease payment to the city every year for 99 years, starting at \$1,200. The buyers also would pay annual condo maintenance fees.

The deal would give the Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show a permanent home at the complex, which has hosted it since 1976. It would give the public a grassy park, atop a parking garage.

Already completed at Bahia Mar were \$19 million in marina renovations. And in January, the city approved Beachwalk at Bahia Mar, two three-story office/restaurants.

The project was bashed in City Hall last week by some neighbors, who said it is too large and not financially generous enough to taxpayers. It won praise from others, particularly those in the marine industry who believe the economically vital boat show would get a competitive boost from the remake.

Henn said he'll never give up trying for a unanimous city vote, and support from all the neighbors. "Am I willing to reduce the number of residential units? Yes. Am I willing to lower height if necessary? Yes. Am I willing to pay more? Yes. The answer is yes, yes, yes. ... There's too much money to be made, there's too much good to be done for us not to compromise."

Henn said he wasn't surprised by city commissioners' lack of enthusiastic support, and was glad they said he can start talking to city staff.

In an e-mail to some of his opponents last week, Henn wrote that his daily prayer book had a "very compelling message" he keeps thinking about. "The title at the top of the page is 'Do it Now!' " Henn wrote, "and the Bible verse below is 'Agree with your adversary quickly...' (Matthew 5:25)."

That'll be tough. Henn's district commissioner, Charlotte Rodstrom, is so opposed to the project she sent a letter to residents warning them about it.

Mayor Jack Seiler said he's "hopeful" and "optimistic" a deal will be struck. But he thinks the development looks "a little imposing," and the developer needs to "get realistic that this is a public asset that is probably the most valuable property in the city, and if they were to buy this property it would cost them a heck of a lot of money."

Wednesday's Planning and Zoning meeting is at City Hall, 100 N. Andrews Ave., at 6:30 p.m. The public can attend. More details from the developer's point of view are online at www.bahiamarpark.com. The city documentation is online at www.fortlauderdale.gov under "City Commission" and then "Meeting Agendas and Minutes." Click on backup materials about Bahia Mar Park from July 7.

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