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FEATURED

Revised Venture Drive district gets OK from Planning Commission

By Curt Yeomans

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The Gwinnett County Planning Commission recommended approval of a heavily revised version of the proposed Venture District ordinance on Tuesday night. (File Photo)

Gwinnett County planning commissioners signed off on a revised set of guidelines for

redeveloping the Venture Drive area near Gwinnett Place Mall on Tuesday night.

The Venture Drive Redevelopment Overlay District ordinance has been floated around for month — the Planning Commission even approved a previous version of it earlier this year — but it stalled at the Board of Commissioners level. That’s because the board had consultants review and re-write it before sending it back to the Planning Commission.

This was the first test for the newly revised ordinance, which was trimmed down, consolidate and re-organized.

“This is innovative, this is forward thinking for Gwinnett County,” Planning Commission Chairman Chuck Warbington said. “This is sort of taking us to the next level in regard to redevelopment and urban design with walkability, and I couldn’t be more excited to move this forward.”

This is just a recommendation from the Planning Commission though. A final decision on the ordinance, as well as an affiliated amendment to the county’s zoning map, must be approved by the Board of Commissioners later this month before it can go into effect.

If approved, it will allow developers to go straight to the process of getting building permits for projects rather than first going through the Planning Commission.

“The intention is to handle the zoning upfront, and it’s basically telling the investors, ‘This is what we’d like to see and here’s your sandbox, go make it happen,’ ” Warbington said. “That’s the beauty behind it.”

County officials are keen on the idea of setting up the Venture Drive area for redevelopment, which would include vertical development with buildings as tall as 225 feet allowed (down from the previously recommended maximum height of 310 feet).

Mixed uses such as residential, retail and office space would all be on the table for the district, which is bordered by Pleasant Hill Road, Interstate 85 and Steve Reynolds and Satellite Boulevards.

“The purpose of this overlay is to act as a catalyst to help spur redevelopment,” Jerry Oberholtzer told the Planning Commission.

The revised ordinance drops a requirement that property owners who chose to develop land in the overlay district area had to sign paperwork committing to participate in the district. The previous ordinance also said variances would not be allowed, but the new version says the county’s director of planning and development can grant them.

Other changes include:

- A previous plan for density bonuses was dropped;
- The minimum amount of open space required for a development was increased from 15 percent to 20 percent;
- “Blocks” were added as a way to require connectivity;
- Sidewalk widths were increased from four feet for internal sidewalks and five-foot external sidewalks to 10 feet wide sidewalks; and

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- A Special Administrative Permit for new construction or renovation of more than 60 percent of principal structures was added.

The proposed overlay district even has some neighboring property owners who are outside its boundaries wishing they could join in. Attorney Marian Adeimy said she represented one such property owner.

“If it were to be expanded, they would be able to serve as a potential example of why these land use plans and overlays are so important and so critical to the county’s success,” Adeimy told the Planning Commission. “The overlay allows for an opportunity for smart growth, quality growth and a quality mixture of uses, and it gives incentives for developers to be creative and to think outside the box.”

District One Planning Commissioner Paula Hastings said expanding the boundaries would take some review though.

“That’s not something we’re necessarily opposed to, but obviously we need to give some serious thought to that and due diligence,” she said.

But it goes back to why officials are excited about the overlay district and its potential to spur development in the mall area. Warbington said he believe the market will respond positively to the district’s creation.

“It’s just a new way of thinking by doing zoning up front,” he said.

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