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First high-rise request filed 03/26/2006

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LAWRENCEVILLE — A group of investors have filed the first rezoning request for high-rise condo towers in Gwinnett County. The site: a small, undeveloped tract on Steve Reynolds Boulevard near Interstate 85.

Two 25-story towers designed by an architectural firm that worked on the World Trade Center would rise 300 feet into the air, each topped by penthouses.

Built into their base, and between them, would be four stories of shops and a parking deck with 529 spaces. A landscaped park atop the garage and a fitness center would serve residents of the 263 condo units.

The Gwinnett Board of Commissioners adopted regulations in December that allow high-rise condo towers in business centers bordering Interstate 85 and Peachtree Industrial Boulevard near Norcross.

Speculation has since swirled about where the first high-rise will go. County officials say they have been contacted by numerous parties interested in building towers, but the first rezoning application was submitted late Thursday afternoon by Steve Reynolds Boulevard Development LLC.

The group has a contract to buy the 4.7 acres that back up to the Hampton Green business park. A Wachovia Bank sits next to the wooded site that is zoned for industrial use. The developers want it rezoned to high-rise residential.

"We are very excited about this project," said Lawrenceville attorney Jack Wilson, who the investors have hired to shepherd the rezoning through the county review process.

"Obviously it's the first one, but the location is prime for this type of use given its close proximity to the interstate."

The proximity to the Gwinnett Place business district excites those involved in efforts to improve traffic and add parks and other amenities in the commercial area on the edge of Duluth.

"That's exactly the kind of project we need," said Mark Williams, a board member of the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement

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District. "It will bring more people in that will shop and eat here." County officials also view high-rises as a way to help revitalize aging parts of Gwinnett by bringing in residents who will frequent existing businesses and new ones that would follow.

"I think this area is ripe for redevelopment," said County Commissioner Lorraine Green.

She said several Gwinnett Place properties have been eyed for potential high-rises.

"I think this is probably a more attractive proposal than if it had been on Pleasant Hill Road," Green said. "The traffic situation is better on Steve Reynolds (Boulevard)."

The county Planning Commission and the Board of Commissioners will both hold public hearings and vote on the rezoning in June.

No land in the county is zoned for high-rises, meaning the county commission must give its approval before one can be built anywhere in unincorporated Gwinnett.

A race of sorts has occurred since the county opened the door to high-rises, with developers interested in building them pushing to be among the first to get one completed, according to officials and some people involved in the development process.

One reason is that there will be only so much demand for high-rise condos, and the initial projects will be able to tap into it, leaving little demand for others that might follow.

At the same time, Green said people are not jumping in without first doing their homework.

"I think there's a lot of interest, but they are quite expensive to build," Green said of high-rises. "They are massive undertakings, and I think people are approaching this slowly, which is a good thing.

"They are trying to make sure all the financing and development components fall into place before they approach the county, which is appropriate."

While the rezoning application filed Thursday surprised some people trying to keep track of where high-rises might go, Williams bragged he had known about it for weeks.

"I think it's almost like a contest to see who can get the first one out of the ground (in the Gwinnett Place district), and I think that is exciting," Williams said.

High-rises can go in "major activity centers," or heavily developed areas where businesses, shops, restaurants and offices and even entertainment venues are massed together, such as around the Gwinnett Civic Center on Sugarloaf Parkway.

Locations along Interstate 85 where high-rises are allowed are at Jimmy Carter Boulevard, the Gwinnett Place area, the Sugarloaf area and the Mall of Georgia.

They also are allowed along Peachtree Industrial Boulevard between the DeKalb County line and Holcomb Bridge Road.


Condo towers can only go on parcels that have access to major


roads and are in close proximity to public transit. The density can be up to 60 dwellings per acre.

Consultants hired by the county said allowing such high-density development in commercial centers could help rejuvenate areas marred by urban blight or experiencing decline.

The development proposed for Steve Reynolds Boulevard was designed by Yamasaki Associates Inc., whose founder, architect Minoru Yamasaki, designed the World Trade Center, Wilson said. The company is based in Troy, Mich.

"It's a first-class architectural firm and would be a very good beginning for this type of use in the county," Wilson said.

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