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Conditions for high-rise could put project in jeopardy

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Gwinnett County's planning board Wednesday recommended — sort of — that county commissioners approve a plan for two 25-story high-rise condominiums on Steve Reynolds Boulevard near Shackelford Road and I-85.

Their recommendation comes with three pages of conditions that might restrict the builder to a single tower unless its developers obtain the right for a second road entrance.

"We've had our concerns on this site," said Planning Commission Chairman Eric Johansen. "He's made some concessions and we've made some concessions."

But without a second tower, the developer may abandon the project, said Lee Tucker, a Gwinnett attorney representing the Bella Verde project before the board.

Tucker's client, a local subsidiary of Michigan-based architecture firm Yamasaki Associates Inc., will review the board's recommendations, but "no, we are not in agreement with what they conditioned," Tucker said.

The high-rise proposal is the first of its kind presented to Gwinnett County planners since the county changed zoning rules in December to allow 25-story residential buildings. Commissioners will face at least two more proposals for tower condominiums in coming months: a redevelopment of the former Lucent Technologies fiber-optics plant at Jimmy Carter Boulevard and I-85, and a second for an 11-tower mixed use development near Gwinnett Place mall.

"This is a great day for Gwinnett," said Jose Perez, a planning commissioner. "We're looking forward to more and more of these."

Tucker presented plans to build a 263-unit condominium development mixing retail and office space with high-priced residential condominiums. At the proposed minimum of \$350 per square foot, one 1,200-foot condo would sell for \$420,000. The developer plans to spend about \$150 million to build the high-rises, according to materials developers submitted to the Atlanta Regional Commission.

Neighboring condominium owners smiled at the proposed price, and what it may do to their property values.

"I'm not going to pay that much for it, but someone will," said Cynthia Martin, 39, who owns a condo at Duluth Place.

But the project would have only a single entrance from Steve Reynolds Boulevard. Regional planners said that one road entrance would be sufficient, Tucker said. But the board unanimously recommended that the developer be limited to a single tower containing no more than 200 units unless they can secure a second entrance on Shackleford or Club Drive from neighboring property owners.

Tucker said that the developer has been actively negotiating with the neighbors for access. However, the project doesn't need the extra access, he said.

Commissioners also recommend several other conditions before the project could go forward. The developer would have to stick to the site plan presented before the commission — any variations would be subject to the approval of the county's planning director.

The developer would have to post a bond equal to the cost of construction before starting. Donations of \$100,000 to the county traffic department for road improvements, \$50,000 to the fire department for new equipment and possibly \$60,000 to the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District for landscaping would also be required, among other restrictions.

Tucker said he's not happy with the conditions, but his main concern was being able to build two 25-story towers. "Everything flows from that," he said. "It has to make economic sense."

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