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Tabling buys time for condo developer

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A foundering plan to erect two high-rise condo towers at Gwinnett Place mall avoided the County Commission's wrecking ball Tuesday night.

In a 3-0 vote, the board voted to table a final vote on the Grand at Gwinnett Place to enable developer George Thorndyke more time to answer county officials' questions about the project.

Thorndyke's proposal appeared headed for defeat after the Gwinnett Planning Commission issued an unambiguous recommendation to reject the project. Members of the appointed board, which last week voted 7-1 against the project, voiced exasperation at the developer for failing to provide information they had requested.

Thorndyke was not present for the commission vote, but his attorney, Michael Sullivan, said a "lifestyle statement" he had presented to the board last week should answer most of the questions.

A final County Commission vote is scheduled for Feb. 6.

Commissioners Lorraine Green, Mike Beaudreau and Commission Chairman Charles Bannister voted to table the project. Commissioner Bert Nasuti was absent and Commissioner Kevin Kenerly abstained.

Regardless of the outcome, Green said she supports the concept of bringing high-rises to Gwinnett Place mall area as a means of revitalizing the once-thriving retail shopping district.

"There is no greater champion of the revitalization of Gwinnett Place than me," Green said. "Gwinnett Place is going to be revitalized. It is going to become a shining star again."

High-rise supporters contend that building high-rise condominiums in declining commercial areas such as Gwinnett Place would jump-start the local economy.

That's because such developments would put a large new customer base within walking distance of the surrounding retail stores and restaurants.

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Thorndyke's proposal, for example, calls for the construction of two 25-story towers with a combined 312 upscale units that would be priced in the \$350,000 range.

But residential high-rises are an untested concept in Gwinnett. Since the county's adoption of the new zoning classification last year, only one high-rise project has been approved. Michigan-based Yamasaki Atlanta LLC, which succeeded in getting a rezoning last summer, has yet to break ground on its twin-tower, high-rise project at Steve Reynolds Boulevard and Club Drive.

But Green says more are coming. Prior to Tuesday's vote, she said she routinely gets calls from developers interested in building high-rises in the Gwinnett Place area. Six of the proposals that had been described to her, the commissioner described as "serious."

The next high-rise project likely to be considered by the board is a project involving real estate investor Wayne Mason and a group of Korean investors: the proposed complex at the Global Station development in Duluth.

While Mason is bullish on high-rises in Gwinnett, he said they are not a sure thing.

"I feel confident they will be successful," Mason said. "But me saying they will and them being successful are two different things."

Supporters of the concept, including Green, said high-rises could help and others believe upscale residential high-rises could be used to help Gwinnett's decaying commercial areas.

"The appeal of them is when they are used for redevelopment," Green said.

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