
High-rise on track despite split

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DULUTH — A business rift between two companies developing Gwinnett's first residential high-rise will not prevent the towers' construction. Yamasaki Architecture, an internationally renowned firm that designed New York's World Trade Center, is no longer involved with La Belle Verde, a high-rise project near Gwinnett Place Mall set to break ground this spring.

Instead, the project is in the hands of Kelly Hong, a former partner with the group, who has formed her own firm, Yamasaki Development.

The company is in the process of closing on 4.7 acres on Steve Reynolds Boulevard where the towers will be built and finalizing Australian financing to see the project through, said Keith Kim, the vice president of development for Hong's new company.

"The money's almost ready," Kim said. "We're not going nowhere. We're the first approved high-rise in Gwinnett County. We know we're responsible."

Kim said the troubles began before La Belle Verde was even approved, when Hong formed Yamasaki Atlanta LLC, a company associated with Yamasaki Architecture, a Troy, Mich.-based company with offices around the globe. Three other partners had each promised to contribute \$250,000 to the company, Kim said, but only Hong put her money in.

In December, Kim said, Hong dissolved Yamasaki Atlanta to form Yamasaki Development.

"We had no use to use them anymore," Kim said. "They didn't put the money in. Kelly paid all architectural fees."

Kim said the architectural plans will not change.

Hong's company is no longer using promotional materials from Yamasaki Architecture, Kim said, but is keeping the name — which he said is not trademarked — to keep a consistent feel with La Belle Verde and two other downtown projects associated with the name.

Representatives from Yamasaki Architecture did not return several phone calls seeking comment.

Kim put a positive spin on the split, saying it would be beneficial to the project as payments originally intended for the parent company will now be earmarked for construction, including more parking.

The project is still scheduled for completion in 2009.

About 40 percent of the high-rise's 263 units had been pre-reserved before sales were frozen last year, Kim said, though several people who intended to buy the units have since backed out. On average, the units were selling for \$350,000. Kim said sales will continue once ground is broken in April or May. Joe Allen, executive director of the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District, said he understands the high-rise is continuing to move forward and maintains such projects will define the area's future.

"Every development is going to have its ups and downs," he said. "Until I'm able to get in the elevator and push the button to the 25th floor, I don't know."

County Commissioner Lorraine Green, whose district includes La Belle Verde, said she is not concerned about the rift's impact on the viability of high-rises near Gwinnett Place Mall.

The project that was approved, she said, will be done well regardless of who completes it.

"I don't think it will affect the quality," she said. "That's why we put four pages of conditions on the project, so no matter who built it, it would be a quality project."