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Skeptical residents pack house as developer talks about plans for Sarasota's Laurel Park



Derek Gilliam

Sarasota Herald-Tribune

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SARASOTA – Nearly 100 residents of the downtown neighborhood of Laurel Park attended a neighborhood workshop hosted this week by Benderson Development Co. in a process that could see part of the historic neighborhood rezoned and redeveloped after Sarasota County government vacates its longtime headquarters.

The county has a lease agreement that runs through 2025 with Benderson after the Manatee County-based company purchased the property for \$25 million in 2021.

Benderson — which developed the University Town Center and is working on the Siesta Promenade, among many other commercial projects — met a skeptical audience Tuesday night concerned about recent changes to state law that creates the potential for dramatically higher residential growth.

While part of the county headquarters property is in the downtown area with the potential for more residential development, a large parking lot south of Morrill Street has a residential zoning that allows a maximum of nine units per acre. It is also on the northern border of the historic neighborhood of Laurel Park, which has in the past been well organized and vocal about city development issues.

The state's new Live Local Act was brought up several times by residents at the meeting. The law was ostensibly promoted as a way to spur development of more affordable

housing, but it can also strip local governments of many of their regulatory powers when a developer pledges to build affordable housing in areas zoned for commercial, industrial or mixed-use projects.

Residents appeared worried that by rezoning the property in the neighborhood to Downtown Neighborhood and Downtown Edge, which are both mixed-use zoning designations, Benderson would open the possibility that the Live Local Act could be applied in Laurel Park and gain the ability to dramatically increase the number of residences allowed.

A Benderson representative said the developer did not plan to use Live Local Act in its redevelopment plans.

Several audience members also expressed frustration with a lack of concrete details for the development. A site plan, which is not required by Sarasota Government during a rezone petition, was not presented during the meeting.

One apparent area of agreement centered on the County Administrative building at 1600 Ringling Boulevard. Several residents said the building was ugly and they were grateful the building would be receiving a facelift in the near future.

Benderson's Todd Mathes said the company plans to reuse, but substantially modify the building, which was built in the 1970s.

However, the neighborhood appeared most focused on the south parking lot, where at times the crowd appeared hostile to any change to the neighborhood's lower residential zoning allowance, especially given the scant details about what would eventually be built there.

Several speakers questioned why Benderson needed the zoning changes at all.

"They certainly could," Philip DiMaria, a planner for Kimley-Horn representing Benderson at the meeting, said about Benderson utilizing the current zoning. " ... We think that this could make for a much better project that is more valuable for the neighborhood."

The representatives conducting the workshop for Benderson said they planned this workshop to be the first of a number of future meetings between the developer and the Laurel Park neighborhood where both sides could discuss the project and what would be palatable to residents.

"Our hope is to – and it's very aspirational, and we may not get there – but our hope is to sit down and look at what's there, which is a parking lot and a fence that faces Dolphin (Lane), and what could be under the existing zoning, which is something and where we want to go and what's important to the neighborhood," Mathes told the crowd. " ... I don't have those answers and I'll only be able to get to those questions once we work through this process."

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