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Scaled-back plan OK'd

The Sarasota city commissioners approve a much smaller project, despite one dissenter's strong reservations.

By [Michael Braga](#)

SARASOTA -- After a lengthy and sometimes contentious discussion, the Sarasota City Commission voted 3-to-1 in favor of allowing a developer to proceed with a vastly scaled-down version of a project that was to have enveloped both the Sarasota Opera House and the Golden Apple Dinner Theatre.

The Plaza Verdi project, which originally entailed the construction of two towers between Palm and Pineapple avenues -- one 18 stories and the other 10 -- now includes only the smaller tower.

The project's developer, Ersa Grae Corp., said the change was needed because of the Golden Apple's recent withdrawal.

But the Golden Apple owners countered that Ersa Grae President Ali Ebrahimi never wanted them in the project to begin with.

"As far as I'm concerned he planned to screw us from the beginning," said Roberta MacDonald Turoff, who has run the Golden Apple with her husband for 34 years. "I feel he only wanted us in order to get the project, and he always intended to proceed with a scaled-down version."

The commissioners spent two hours Thursday afternoon listening to developers, the public and the city attorney before concluding that the proposed changes did not represent a material breach of the city's request for proposals issued to developers 18 months ago.

In the end, the decision to proceed came down to parking.

The Plaza Verdi project includes the construction of 300 parking spaces the city desperately needs.

"I've been very frustrated with the length of time this has taken," said Commissioner Lou Ann Palmer. "We wanted parking and we wanted it yesterday. We're now on our third batter and I don't want to see this go into extra innings."

Palmer was referring to the fact that two previous business groups have attempted to develop the site and build the public parking, but have failed for various reasons.

Commissioners Danny Bilyeu and Richard Martin agreed with Palmer that further delays would not be in the public interest.

"I think what's good for the public is to move forward," Martin said.

But Mary Anne Servian, the one dissenter on the commission, expressed concern that moving ahead with a substantially revamped project was not fair to the other development groups that submitted requests for proposals.

"The fact that there was a lack of communication between Ersa Grae and the Golden Apple is very disturbing to me," Servian said. "I'm concerned that the larger proposal wasn't really their intention in the

beginning."

Other developers who submitted proposals 18 months ago should have the right to resubmit in lieu of Ersa Grae's proposed changes, Servian added.

"We are desperately in need of parking," Servian said. "But I don't see a plan here. I don't really know what's going to happen. It seems like we're putting ourselves in a legal trap."

Susan Danis, Sarasota Opera's executive director, acknowledged that changes stemming from the Golden Apple's withdrawal took her completely by surprise. She said she wasn't sure how the opera will proceed.

All she knew was that the opera would now be in charge of refurbishing or reconstructing its own building, a process that would mean spending upwards of \$10 million.

"We're going to have to start all over again," Danis said.

Meanwhile, representatives from Sarasota Main Street LLC, the development group that came in second in the city's request for proposals, argued that Ersa Grae's failure to deliver on its original plan meant that its development rights should be turned over to their group.

City Attorney Robert Fournier, however, disagreed. He concluded that Ersa Grae's modified proposal was not materially different from its original plan.

"I feel comfortable that Plaza Verdi is not finished and can consider going forward," he said.
