

sgvtribune.com

Baldwin Park seeks downtown alternatives

By Tania Chatila, Staff Writer

Posted: 12/01/2008 10:49:18 PM PST



Mark Cyr, center, Treasurer of the Community Alliance for Redevelopment Accountability (CARA) stands with residents and business owners in front of the former Albertson's store in Baldwin Park on Friday November 28, 2008. CARA members say the city stopped Superior Market from moving into the former Albertson's store that they bought two years ago. (Keith Duffin for SGVTribune.com)

BALDWIN PARK - City officials spent more than a year pushing for a redevelopment project that promised to transform the downtown area into a bustling neighborhood of condominiums and retailers.

A group of small business owners spent just as long fighting it.

But after the developer earlier this month suddenly pulled out of the project because of financing problems, Baldwin Park is back at square one.

As the city's elected leaders look to alternatives for downtown revitalization plans, members of the Community Alliance for Redevelopment Accountability (CARA) hope city officials finally will incorporate their ideas for downtown Baldwin Park.

"We've asked the city to stop, to back up, to come to us with a plan to include the homes, the business owners and the residents in the revitalization of the downtown," said Mark Cyr, owner of California Discount Glass on Maine Avenue and CARA's treasurer. "It's time they start thinking about the community."

Baldwin Park had been in negotiations with developer Bisno since December 2006 for the roughly 109-acre project near Maine Avenue and Ramona Boulevard.

Proposals called for turning the city's main commercial corridor into a bustling urban village that could have included a new hotel, a charter school and thousands of luxury homes.

Most appealing to the city was Bisno's offer to fund the entire project up front without the use of any city money.

Until recently, the project was on track and officials were in the middle of circulating an environmental impact report, which opponents

Advertisement

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™



argue had significant flaws.

Even as the economy turned bad, Ricardo Monroy, Bisno's vice president of public affairs, said in October that the financial meltdown pounding the nation was not affecting the development.

Then on Nov. 19, city officials announced Bisno was pulling out of the project after citing the developer's inability to finance the multi-million dollar proposal.

Two days prior, Robert Bisno, owner of the development company, listed his Beverly Hills home for sale.

Jennifer Fentin, the listing broker for Bisno's home at 66 Beverly Park, said the 16,000-square-foot home that sits on 5.1 acres of land is selling for \$29.5 million.

Repeated calls to Monroy and John DeCler, Bisno's vice president and chief operating officer, were not returned over the course of a week.

"Nobody anticipated the project would come to a halt," Baldwin Park Community Development Director Marc Castagnola said, and added the city has not "lost a penny" as a result of the project failure.

According to Bisno's contract, the city was not "liable for any costs associated with the planning and development" of the project. But staff time like Castagnola's was not billed.

Castagnola estimated Bisno invested about \$2 million in the project. There still are some outstanding invoices owed to Baldwin Park that - contractually - need to be reimbursed, officials said.

"We consider this a major setback and a disappointment, but we are not holding Bisno responsible," Castagnola said. "Obviously there are some outside influences."

Castagnola cited the bad economy, which industry experts said significantly could impact how Baldwin Park moves forward.

Mayor Manuel Lozano said a "very prominent development company" expressed interest in revamping the downtown area on a much smaller scale than the Bisno project.

He would not name the new developer.

Jack Kyser, senior vice president and chief economist of the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corp., said other developers likely will run into the same roadblocks as Bisno.

"Financing is going to be extremely difficult to find," Kyser said. "Lenders are being very, very cautious with anything that involves office space, and anything retail is going to be even more cautious because after the first of (2009) people fear there are going to be more store closings."

Since Bisno already laid much of the groundwork, developing in Baldwin Park's downtown should be easier, Councilman Anthony

Advertisement

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™



Bejarano said.

"There is a way to make this project work," he said, and added despite the setback the city must move forward to address housing and transportation issues facing Southern California.

"We learned a lot from the process. We got a lot of input from the community, both positive and negative."

Most of that opposition has come from CARA, listed with the Secretary of State as a nonprofit public benefit corporation. It was formed by Baldwin Park resident James Treasure to fight the Bisno project. Treasure recently took a leave from the organization because of medical reasons.

"The city's so-called redevelopment effort is simply another name for their scheme to work with a favored fat-cat developer to grind the little guy into the dirt, but the little guy isn't going to be ground down," said Robert P. Silverstein, the Pasadena-based attorney that has been representing CARA for about a year.

Silverstein criticized a 2006 city ordinance that prohibits the development of supermarkets in the downtown area that are more than 10,000 square feet.

CARA has been a longtime advocate of bringing Superior Grocers into the city, specifically into the site of the old Albertson's.

Officials with Superior Grocers could not be

reached for comment.

"They imposed this restriction in order to thwart some really good development that was going to go in there," Silverstein said. "The city has been the single greatest contributor to the lack of development in recent years because they've put up roadblocks."

Silverstein likened CARA's relationship with the city to the biblical fight between David and Goliath.

"I would say that some small wars have caused less damage and destruction than what the City Council of Baldwin Park was planning to afflict on its public," he said.

At the heart of the opposition's arguments was the threat of eminent domain - the argument that hundreds of residents and businesses would have been forced out by the city to make way for a development they believed was just "too grandiose" for Baldwin Park.

"Bisno was never going to be about taking the middle- and lower-class people and building a project for them," said Greg Tuttle, owner of Tuttle's Parts Exchange on Ramona Boulevard. Tuttle has been spearheading a recall effort against Bejarano and councilwomen Monica Garcia and Marlen Garcia.

Cyr said he would like to see auto dealerships and an AMC theater in downtown Baldwin Park.

He is enlisting the help of businesses to draw up

Advertisement

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

The logo for sgvtribune.com is displayed in white text on a blue rectangular background.

plans for a downtown that doesn't bulldoze any property, he said.

"It was all about condos that (the people) can't afford," Tuttle said. "Why bring a Starbucks when Latinos don't go to Starbucks? Cater to what you have."

City officials said they have always been willing to hear community input.

"CARA obviously has a whole different concept (for the downtown)," Lozano said. "Clearly we will look at it."

Officials remain steadfast on a project that will reinvent the downtown, reshape Baldwin Park's image and offer better retail-and-housing options for the city's residents.

"The vision for greater revitalization of the downtown has not changed," Castagnola said. "We have a very strategic location in the whole San Gabriel Valley at the juncture of two freeways, and a solid workforce."

tania.chatila@sgvn.com

(626) 962-8811, Ext. 2109

Advertisement

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™