

Height is the problem with proposed Rosemary Park condos

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CORRECTION: The following correction was published on Thursday, November 11, 2004: Correction: A headline on a story Wednesday, about a proposed Sarasota development, mistakenly referred to the project as the Rosemary Park condos. The project is called CityPointe Downtown Sarasota.

Developer Wayne Morehead has proposed a condominium project that has almost everything the city wants: lower-priced housing above retail shops within walking distance of downtown.

But it's tall, and falls just outside the zone where the city allows tall condo towers to be built.

So it's become a test of how strictly the city will interpret the 4-year-old downtown master plan, which is supposed to be the road map for growth over the next two decades.

Morehead wants to remake a four-block swath of Coconut Avenue between Boulevard of the Arts and 10th Street with 374 condominiums and 89,000 square feet of shops and commercial space.

It's a project the Rosemary Neighborhood Association supports as a way to bring more residents to the up-and-coming area north of downtown.

But Morehead's plans for CityPointe Downtown Sarasota show eight buildings, some of which would be eight or nine stories tall.

Under **Sarasota's downtown** master plan, buildings on this section of Coconut Avenue are limited to five stories.

So city planners are advising the commission to reject a rezoning for the project, though it features the kind of mixed-use, downtown living they hope to promote.

"This is not easy, because there's a lot of things we like about this project," Sarasota Senior Planner Harvey Hoglund said.

Hoglund pointed out that the downtown plan calls for "small-scale, mixed-use" buildings in the areas of the city that lie outside of the downtown core.

Most other buildings in the eastern section of Rosemary are one or two stories, and the city has not allowed them to be higher, he said.

Morehead doesn't see the problem.

He points out that the 16-story Renaissance of Sarasota condominium tower is just west of his proposed development, and the Sarasota Housing Authority's 11-story McCown Towers is across the street on the south side.

Also, Morehead's Atlanta-based company is about to break ground on an eight-story condominium on the southwest corner of Boulevard of the Arts and Coconut.

"I think that we are extremely compatible with the city's plan," Morehead said. "We're bringing residential in."

If approved, CityPointe would fundamentally alter the landscape in the Rosemary District, a historic area that has been slowly gaining technology firms, shops and cafes in recent years.

Some neighbors say the condos would help bring more people to the area after dark.

"It's such a nice project that I would hate to see a couple stories get in the way of it," said Greg Penix, president of the Rosemary Neighborhood Association. "I think it would be a real loss to the area."

The project would replace seven aging, single-story apartment duplexes that many Hispanic families rent for \$450 a month. It also displaces Unity Church and would require that two historic buildings in the Rosemary District be moved.

Morehead is promising to make his condominiums "workforce housing," saying a significant portion will be priced between \$175,000 and \$250,000. He said he needs taller buildings so he can fit in more condominiums and keep the prices low.

Ian Black, a local real estate broker who owns property in the area, said the downtown master plan should allow for that extra density. He suggested that the city approve Morehead's project on the condition that he promise to make the units "affordable."

"The height is an issue you could deal with," Black said. "The city is losing an unbelievable opportunity for the Rosemary District to really realize its full potential."

Mike Piergrossi, manager at one of the district's newest shops, the Sarasota Coffee and Tea Company, understands why some residents favor the condominium project. More condos mean more foot traffic in the area, which Piergrossi is eager to see.

But he thinks the city should continue to enforce its rules about growth.

"I do believe there should be limits on it," Piergrossi said. "It's a beautiful skyline here. I believe that's something important to preserve, too."

Interested?

The City Planning Board is scheduled to hold a public hearing on the CityPointe development at 6 p.m. Wednesday in City Hall, 1565 First St., Sarasota.