

Editorial Opinion

EDITORIAL

Naples board made right decision about Beach Hotel

Editorial Board

Naples Daily News

Someone should write a book about the plan to re-make the Naples Beach Hotel & Golf Club.

In fact, with all the staff reports, builder's applications and public comments, a book probably already has been written. Someone just needs to put it in order.

What's more impressive than the amount of material generated, though, is the care and thoroughness with which members of the Naples Planning Advisory Board, the staff and the public went through it all as part of a review process that culminated Wednesday.

For reasons to be discussed later, we think the Planning Advisory Board reached the correct decision, voting 7-0 to recommend approval of the plans with only slight revisions.

But one couldn't watch Wednesday's eight-hour meeting, or a similar one a month earlier, and not be impressed with the process.

Planning Advisory Board members obviously did their homework. They asked the right questions and demanded answers. When the developer, the Athens Group of California, and the longtime Beach Club owners — the Watkins family — didn't have them in March, they put off a decision to let everyone work together to come up with compromise solutions.

The public fully participated, filling the council chambers with speakers in favor of and opposed to the project.

Those in favor were impressive, attesting to the importance of the hotel to the city and praising the Watkins family for generations of stewardship and philanthropy.

Opponents were equally so, making rational, insightful and respectful arguments against the plans they think will increase traffic and foster canyonization of Gulf Shore Boulevard.

What resulted was a better plan than the one initially brought forth, with the developer making concessions on some setbacks and agreeing to stronger language to ensure the hotel's golf course remains just that.

The proposal to tear down the existing hotel and replace it with a smaller one, along with residential condos on both the east and west sides of Gulf Shore Boulevard, now goes to the City Council.

We encourage the council members to also do their homework and add their own ideas to the mix at their April 17 meeting.

We're confident the public will turn out again to be heard, but the unanimous vote of the Planning Advisory Board suggests the Beach Club redevelopment is on its way to ultimate approval.

As mentioned, we think that is the correct course.

The Athens Group plan would maintain the golf course as green space in the heart of the city. It would ensure public access to the beach and the hotel, with its beachfront bar and restaurant.

In return, the developer is asking for variances on setbacks and an additional 11 feet of building height on some structures.

That's a reasonable trade-off, in our view.

It must be remembered that change is coming to the Beach Club. The Watkins family wants to step away from the business, and something is going to fill that space.

Existing zoning and codes would allow up to 12 seven-story buildings where the hotel and conference center are now. More than 150 high-end single-family homes could replace the golf course.

Whatever growing pains might accompany the Athens Group's proposal, we think those alternatives would be far worse.

The Planning Advisory Board, after careful deliberation, an open discussion and a lot of reading, came to the same conclusion.

Good for them and everyone else who helped write this chapter in Naples' history.

Brent Batten wrote this for the Naples Daily News editorial board.