

Editorial Opinion

Naples Daily News

WILLIAM R. BARKER
PRESIDENT AND PUBLISHER

PENNY FISHER
NEWS DIRECTOR

1100 Immokalee Road, Naples, Florida 34110
239-262-3161

NAPLES BEACH HOTEL

Proposal to redevelop site merits support

Editorial Board
Naples Daily News

Not since the remaking of Fifth Avenue South in the mid-1990s has Naples been faced with a redevelopment question as important as the ones before the Naples Planning Advisory Board on Wednesday.

So we have no problem with the board's decision to put off for a month making a recommendation on plans to redo the Naples Beach Hotel & Golf Club to gather more information and iron out differences among the developers, city staff and residents concerned with aspects of the project.

But we must implore everyone involved not to tweak the plan into nonexistence.

The public benefits that can be realized — a permanent downzoning of the Beach Club golf course to remove any possibility that it will become a housing tract, continued public access to the hotel's restaurants and sunset bar, and access to the beach itself through the property are too important to risk losing over relatively minor matters of building height and setback.

The Watkins family, longtime owners and operators of the Beach Club, have indicated their intent to turn the enterprise over to someone else. We can only imagine the offers that came their way to redevelop prime beachfront real estate with zoning in place to build hundreds of units in a dozen mid-rise buildings.

The one they selected, from the Athens Group, with a reputation for successful development of upscale resort and residential projects, looks like a winner. It calls for a smaller hotel, smaller meeting spaces, additional hotel amenities, high-end residential condos and, of course, golf.

Decades of community involvement and good stewardship of the property have earned the Watkins family a measure of trust. If they say the Athens Group proposal was the one that best fit their goals of financial viability and keeping the Beach Club an integral part of life in Naples, we tend to believe them.

Wednesday's hearing spanning nearly six hours was productive, with opponents and proponents making reasoned and articulate arguments.

The Athens Group expressed a willingness to work toward consensus and come back to the March 13 Planning Advisory Board meeting with more information and perhaps some compromise.

A common complaint of opponents centered on the height of the tallest residential building planned west of Gulf Shore Boulevard North.

At seven stories above a level of parking, it would tower over its two-story neighbor to the north.

There were legitimate concerns that the building, with tall ceilings demanded by high-end residential buyers plus architectural embellishments and mechanical equipment on top, would look like a 13-story structure.

Be that as it may, what the developer is asking for is only 1½ feet taller than what could be built in the same spot under existing zoning with no additional approvals necessary.

To us, that 1½ feet is a reasonable price to pay for public access to amenities promised in the plan.

There were other concerns, of course. Managing construction traffic, pedestrian traffic and safety at the finished product, and even the vibration effect of construction on the neighbors were discussed.

We're optimistic, as were most people in the room, that compromises can be reached that would allow this project to proceed to the City Council with a favorable recommendation from the Planning Advisory Board.

One of the most vociferous critics Wednesday stated that through the proposal, "They're asking us to throw away what is Naples."

We disagree. We see the Watkins family's selection of the Athens Group as an attempt to keep a meaningful part of what is Naples.

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