

Naples Daily News

Naples City Council unanimously approves new resort to replace Naples Beach Hotel

[Laura Lavden](#), Naples Daily News

Published 7:29 p.m. ET Nov. 20, 2019

Naples City Council has approved plans for a new five-star resort that will take the place of the historic Naples Beach Hotel.

The developer has said the plans are designed to continue the traditions that have made the storied hotel an important part of the fabric of the community, but the project has drawn mixed reaction in the community.

With two unanimous votes of 7-0 Wednesday, the City Council approved a site plan with deviations — or exceptions — from city codes and a developer rights agreement setting the standards for redevelopment of the hotel.

The decisions came after a day-long hearing, during which all aspects of the multi-million-dollar project were presented and considered in great detail.



Aerial of proposed Naples Beach Hotel redevelopment project (Photo: Submitted)

The Athens Group plans to raze the beach hotel and build a smaller luxury resort, with "best-in-class" residential condos along both sides of Gulf Shore Boulevard North.

The Athens Group President Kim Richards issued a statement thanking the community for its support.

"Undertaking this project is a responsibility we take joyfully yet seriously, not only for the City of Naples, but also for the Watkins family and the legacy of hospitality they have forged in this community," the statement reads. "It is an honor to follow in their footsteps, and we look forward to stewarding the next generation of the Naples Beach Hotel."

In a separate but related vote, the City Council also gave a unanimous thumbs up to the revised development plan for the condos after getting some minor concessions from The Athens Group. A second hearing will be required to finalize the vote on this part of the project.

At the second hearing, slated for Dec. 4., council members will once again vote on the changes to the development plan for the residences — as well as the proposed site plan that goes with it.

At Wednesday's meeting, the City Council had a first look at the hotel's design, which generated a host of questions, including why the developer needed a cupola on top of it that would exceed the city's allowable height limits.

Tim McCarthy, architect for Hart Howerton, explained the importance of the cupola, saying it represented an opportunity to "define hospitality in the future," and a way to "extend the Watkins legacy." The alternative, he said, would be a design that would simply not have the same panache.



Children watch as athletes compete in the 31st Annual Fitness Challenge Triathlon at Naples Beach Hotel & Golf Club on Sunday, June 4, 2017. (Photo: Dorothy Edwards/Naples Daily News)

The Watkins family has owned the 125-acre beachfront resort property for more than 70 years and has worked closely with the developer to ensure that it remains as accessible to the public as possible.

The public hearing opened with comments from Henry B. Watkins III, an owner of the hotel and property, who urged the City Council to support the redevelopment project as envisioned by the developer — and to make the "right decision," describing it as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

"We are proud to have been a leader in shaping what Naples has become today," he said. "We believe our vision as a family contributed to today's visions of what Naples' future can be. We chose The Athens Group because we believe they were best suited to carry on this legacy."

He reminded the City Council what his family has done for the community and the importance of continuing its traditions, which the developer has vowed to do by maintaining the golf course and keeping it open to the public.

The project, Watkins said, is in the best interest of "all citizens of Naples," once again providing Naples with a gift of green space, beach access, sunsets and hospitality.

"Remember once in a lifetime only happens once," he said before the start of the developer's formal presentation.



Rendering of pool at proposed Naples Beach Hotel redevelopment project. *(Photo: Submitted)*

During the council's discussion, many of the early concerns and questions raised centered around traffic and parking.

Some council members questioned whether a detailed parking plan presented by the developer's team of experts would accommodate the expected increase in the number of employees needed to run the more upscale luxury resort.

While it will have about 100 fewer rooms, the new resort will have about 440 employees to meet the higher expectations of its higher end market. That compares to fewer than 290 required to service the current hotel.

Based on his own calculations, Councilman Gary Price said he feared that parking on the busiest days might not be enough to fit all of its employees on a peak day in peak season.

"I don't know if the calculations are appropriate, given what's going to be there," he said.

Jeff Perry, senior transportation planner and project manager with Stantec, said that even on the busiest days, all of the employees would not be onsite — and not all of them would require parking spots, as many of them would likely be dropped off, or use bicycles or public transportation to get to work.

Councilman Terry Hutchison asked about the accuracy of the predictions for parking demand — and how the hotel might handle a visit from "the head of state."

Perry quipped that it "depends on what head of state," bringing chuckles from the audience and the council. On a more serious note, he said, the plan requires all hotel guests and visitors to valet park, with no self-parking available for them.

"I've looked at this every which way I can, and believe me, we have the right numbers," Perry said.

The developer's parking analysis shows the need for 552 spots for the hotel's core operations at 100% occupancy in a worst-case scenario. There will be 598 parking spaces, but a total of 641 vehicles could be accommodated using two motor courts — 89 more than what's expected to be needed on the busiest of days.

Additionally, there are remedies built into the parking plan if it should fail due to extreme circumstances, including allowing overflow parking at the driving range for the golf course. That would provide roughly another 100 spots, if it ever becomes necessary, Perry said.

The developer, he said, has also committed to reduce parking demands by encouraging its employees and guests to use alternative modes of transportation, from ride-sharing services to bicycles.

While parking generated a lot of questions, the City Council asked about everything from how the trash would be handled at the development to how it can ensure that the developer keeps its promises to never build on the golf course.

Of the nearly 20 speakers who stood up to voice their opinions about the project, most supported it and applauded the developer's tremendous outreach efforts to the community.

The Athens Group has held more than 70 meetings with neighbors and community groups to answer questions and get feedback about what promises to be one of the biggest redevelopment projects Naples has ever seen.

Naples resident Barry Fitzpatrick described the developer's plans as "rock solid," saying he's confident The Athens Group will deliver what it's promised.

"World class is such an overused word I hesitate to use it," he said. "But if there is such a thing, this is it."

Joe Basili, who lives near the hotel, isn't as enamored with what the developer has proposed. He doesn't like that The Athens Group has asked for multiple variances and deviations from the city's code.

"I'm all for healthy development," he said. "That's what's made Naples great."

The city has a really good comprehensive plan to guide development and there's good reason to follow it, Basili said.

One of his biggest concerns is parking, he said, which he believes won't be sufficient, especially in the busy tourist season.

He urged the City Council to vote no to force more compromises from the developer.

"There is a lot of things being jammed in today," he said, "and that's what concerns me."