

Port Orange makes developer Buddy LaCour's Riverwalk condos a priority

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PORT ORANGE — Efforts to develop a riverfront mixed-use complex here called Riverwalk date back to the late 1990s without much to show for it.

But that could soon change, thanks to a new push by the city's planning department to move developer Buddy LaCour's multimillion dollar condominium/restaurant project to the front of the line.

LaCour said he is hopeful he will finally receive a green light from the city to begin construction.

"We anticipate completing negotiations with the city, I would say in the near future that will allow us to move forward," LaCour said in a phone interview with The News-Journal.

Tim Burman, Port Orange planning manager, said the city is still trying to get a pre-application meeting to get a dialog started with LaCour on the conceptual

plans for his proposed project as well as a more detailed site plan.

Normally, a project's concept plan would be submitted, and as much as a year later a developer would return to the city to get a site plan approved. In this case, once the image of LaCour's \$5 million condominium and restaurant project has been approved, the site plan could receive the city's stamp of approval within a week.

"They just want to get it going," Burman said of efforts to speed LaCour's project through the permitting process.

Burman said he is hopeful a conceptual plan and site plan can be approved before December, which could result in LaCour finally receiving the necessary building permits that would allow him to begin preparing the site early next year.

LaCour said he hopes the concerted effort with the city would give him and his partner in the project, Josif Atanasoski, a clean slate and more control over his property as well as the city's road alongside it.

LaCour wants to close down Halifax Drive to traffic and make the riverfront pedestrian-only. Eventually the city's park sidewalk would wrap around from trailhead at the northernmost end, through the condo area and restaurants, down along the riverfront all the way to Dunlawton, connecting with the existing sidewalk from the causeway.

LaCour said he intends to turn Port Orange's eastern gateway into a landmark.

The project's focal point — a restaurant named The Point that LaCour and Atanasoski would co-own — will cost \$5 million to build and will include 3,000 square feet of retail space. Also in the project's plans is a 96-slip marina and marina clubhouse.

City Councilman Bob Ford, who represents District 1 where the project is located, agreed that demolishing the road is absolutely necessary. The road is expected to be torn out and replaced with the wide walkway along the river — possibly an attractive brick, Ford said.

But Ford, who was the city's police chief from 1986 to 1999 during the beginning of talks regarding developing the riverfront, warned, "If history is any indication

it (the project) will be changed four or five times."

That history goes back at least to 1998 when plans for the riverfront first came before City Council.

RENEWED HOPE

While LaCour says that there is no comprehensive plan yet for the corner of Dunlawton Avenue and U.S. 1, he holds out hope the current working atmosphere with the city — a marked improvement from former years — will continue.

The city owns the vast majority of land on the block that currently is home to a bicycle shop, a Dunkin' Donuts and a lawnmower store. LaCour co-owns several slices of land within the project site with other developers.

"Hopefully we can work out the common ground with the city to continue," LaCour said. "By getting the new restaurant online with a residential component it will add to the feasibility of what happens at the corner."

LaCour and Ford agree one of the big reasons for the Riverwalk project's long delay was the onset of the Great Recession in late 2007.

"We all reacted to the recession. The feasibility of the project between '07 and '08 was nonexistent," LaCour said. "Real estate values were basically reset during that time period, and now as the economy finds a beginning level of stability, the lenders (and) the buyers are reentering the market."

Thanks to the presence of newer shopping centers that have cropped up off Interstate 95 and a Publix grocery store a mile to the north of Riverwalk, LaCour said he believes the foundation for growth along the riverfront is already there.

It just needs a boost.

"With any redevelopment," LaCour said, "it has to be based in economics. Today, the (commercial) rents (in the area where the Riverwalk project is planned) are lower and it cannot afford new development. That's what the residential (towers are) there to cure."

LaCour said he plans on setting the starting price for each condo unit at \$300,000.

"There is a lot of redevelopment potential but very frankly what we need from a shopping standpoint on U.S. 1 are some (retail) anchors that will draw people there, aside from just the restaurants," he said.

RIVERSIDE PARKLAND

While LaCour and the city work to push through the high-rise construction, the city's Riverfront Park construction has been keeping to schedule, according to Margaret Momberger, Port Orange construction and engineering manager. Momberger said the foundation for the kayak and canoe launches, as well as a trailhead — a building housing restrooms — and a bridge over the canal that will through the park and into the Halifax River has been laid. They have also demolished an existing fishing pier.

"As far as the park goes, they're under construction and still on schedule," Momberger said.

And while past efforts to get any project on the heavy-traffic corner of Dunlawton have stalled several times, Ford said he's glad to see progress along the river.

The current work being done "is basically chumming the water," Ford said. "At least the city has started something."