

VENICE COUNCIL GIVES ITS OK TO PORTOFINO PLAN

By Dale White

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VENICE - John Peshkin says he is taking a big risk.

Although existing retail at Laurel Road and Knights Trail struggles to find tenants, Peshkin wants to build a complex with potential for stores and offices at the crossroads east of Interstate 75.

"This is a big gamble I'm willing to take," said Peshkin, whose Laurel Road Property LLC has an option to buy the foreclosed property where a Walmart was once proposed.

On Tuesday, the City Council voted 5-2 to approve Portofino, a commercial-residential development on 50 acres at the northeast corner of the intersection.

Peshkin and the council are aware that The Shoppes at Laurel Square, on the northwest corner, remains mostly vacant.

Still, they express optimism that the recovering housing market in the North Venice area will provide enough future customers to make Portofino successful.

Willow Chase and Venetian Golf and River Club, to the east on Laurel Road, are reaching buildout. Construction is expected to start later this year on the 1,700-home Toscana Isles, north of Portofino on Knights Trail. And plans for other developments are in the works for the recent extension of Jacaranda Boulevard and just west of I-75, on Pinebrook Road.

Portofino could have as many as 650 homes, although that could only happen if none of the 450,000 square feet in approved retail and office space is built.

"That's a fallback in case the commercial doesn't work," said Jeff Boone, Peshkin's attorney.

Council members Jim Bennett and Dave Sherman cast dissenting votes. They objected to a council majority overturning a recommendation by the Planning Commission.

The Planning Commission wanted to require separate approvals for any drive-throughs, take-out windows or outdoor garden centers, which would have called for additional public hearings.

Most council members agreed with Peshkin that the extra steps seemed unnecessary.

Peshkin said he would be unlikely to attract an anchor retail tenant if it could not be assured up front about having a garden center.

The same obstacle would apply to most major restaurant chains, which now include pick-up windows, and banks and pharmacies, for which drive-through lanes are standard, he said.

Boone says Portofino is "a significant downsizing" compared with a development plan approved for the site in 2007.

That plan called for 650,000 square feet of commercial use, including a "big box" store of more than 200,000 square feet on the eastern end of the property that Walmart intended to fill.

Although nearby residents objected strenuously to the Walmart, the city approved the project -- which never materialized.

Peshkin said he conducted 15 meetings with roughly 100 area residents to get their input and reworked his plan several times to accommodate them.

Although a few residents preferred that the council agree with the Planning Commission's recommendation to require special exceptions for some commercial features, most who spoke or wrote to the City Council expressed support for Peshkin's proposal as presented.

Portofino calls for an anchor store of up to 190,000 square feet on the west end of the property, off Knights Trail, and a mix of retail and office buildings of varying size elsewhere on the site.

Five acres at the northeast corner is for residential use only, though some residential could be mixed with commercial on the remaining 45 acres.

Churches, arenas and movie theaters are not included but could be allowed if approved separately by the City Council.

Peshkin agreed, in writing, that prohibited businesses include pain management clinics, adult entertainment venues, utility plants, manufacturers and warehouses.