

Midtown Boca gets 'no-housing' recommendation

By Lulu Ramadan
The Palm Beach Post

BOCA RATON — Developers in the throes of expensive lawsuits against Boca Raton say a new city study is the latest effort to stymie private property rights.

An 11-month city study that wrapped up this week recommended no housing in Midtown Boca Raton, a commercial district south of Glades Road along Military Trail. Landowners want to build high-rise apartments and transform it into a walkable live-work-play district.

The recommendation will be a major roadblock for Midtown landowners, two of whom have filed lawsuits against the city, accusing officials of illegally thwarting and delaying development efforts.

Nader Salour, principal of Cypress Realty of Florida, which filed suit in October, said the city's new study baffled him. Cypress Realty bought

10 acres of land along Military Trail, including the buildings that house bar Nippers and bowling alley Strikes, in 2011 to build apartments.

"We never would have bought the land if we knew it was just commercial," Salour said. Land is generally more valuable when builders can erect high-density homes than commercial plazas like the ones that already exist in central Boca Raton.

"I just do not understand what the city is trying to do here," Salour said.

At the crux of the legal arguments: Midtown Boca Raton is designated in the city's comprehensive plan as a "planned mobility district," or areas where homes may be built near shops and offices to cut down on traffic. Landowners anticipated and spent years planning for a rezoning, according to court records.

In January, developers asked city officials to allow up to 2,500 apartment units in high-rise

buildings. The city council instead called for a small-area plan to inspect the request.

The small-area plan concluded, after lawsuits were filed, that the area can't sustain housing and a special tax should be levied against commercial landowners to offset the cost of desired street improvements.

Cypress Realty, which asked a Palm Beach County Circuit Court judge to force Boca to allow housing, will push back against any special taxing district, Salour said.

"I would imagine there would be huge pushback from any existing property owners for that," he said. "Unless it is a true mixed-use project, which is what the city envisaged happening, I don't see that there's enough of a benefit to the existing landowners to warrant a special tax."

Angelo Bianco, a principal at Crocker Partners, which is suing the city for \$137 million, said the new

study reveals the "true intentions" of Boca Raton officials.

"At a minimum, it shows an attempt to frustrate and delay property owners' rights," he said. Crocker's lawsuit makes similar allegations. Boca Raton officials did not require other planned mobility districts to await small-area plans, but took aim specifically at Midtown, the lawsuit argues.

Councilwoman Andrea O'Rourke, who suggested the small-area plan in January, declined

to comment because of ongoing litigation. Mayor Scott Singer could not immediately be reached for comment. Councilwoman Monica Mayotte, who attended the Tuesday meeting when the city released the study's findings, also declined to comment.

While the study's recommendations came as a blow to developers, the news was welcome to some Boca Raton residents who argued that apartments in Midtown would exacerbate traffic problems in the area.

When Brandon Schaad, the city's development services director, announced that the study called for no housing in Midtown, a resident turned to him and said, "Can I hug you?"

"I'm glad to see Midtown is being well-thought out and well-planned," said Bill DeAngelis, who lives in one of the suburban neighborhoods that border Midtown.

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WORKSHOP

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representing 13 schools took part in The Post's fifth annual High School Newspaper Workshop.

The program included sessions on headline writing, lead writing and innovative storytelling as well as group sessions led by Post reporters and editors.

"The whole purpose of this is to help students not only improve on their journalism skills, but what we want them to do is get even more engaged and involved and interested in careers in this, because it's a great career still," Editor Nick Moschella said. "It's an exciting time as ever to be a journalist. There are so many different ways to tell stories and so many different ways to distribute a story."

Oxbridge Academy started a school newspaper just this year, and advisor Zach Halpern brought three of his students to Thursday's workshop to help them learn more about careers in journalism.

"We want to get them more information about what it means to be a journalist, and get a little bit of a sense of what real-world journalists actually do," he said.

Oxbridge's eight-student newspaper staff published its first issue of The



Nick Moschella, editor of The Palm Beach Post, speaks to students during the annual High School Newspaper Workshop at The Palm Beach Post newspaper Thursday in West Palm Beach. [BILL INGRAM/PALMBEACHPOST.COM]

Oxbridge Current this year, and a second edition will be released shortly, Halpern said.

Suncoast junior Samirah Abeloard is a staff writer for her school's newspaper, The Legend, and she attended Thursday's workshop to improve her writing skills.

"I want to learn how to become a better writer, because this is my first year in newspapers," she said.

Abeloard hasn't decided whether she plans to become a journalist, but Spanish River sophomore Nashki

Joseph already has made up his mind.

A staff writer for his school's newspaper, The Galleon, he said Thursday he looks forward to pursuing a career in journalism despite recent efforts to discredit reporters.

"It inspires me to be better," he said. "I'm more inspired to fact-check, make sure my information is correct. I want to be the best journalist I can possibly be."

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