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WCI abandons riverfront project Fort Myers, developer differed on plans

By [Betty Parker](#)

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WCI Communities backed out of a proposed riverfront project in downtown Fort Myers on Monday, leaving council members debating what to do next.

It was time to step aside after two years of negotiating a project that included retail, condo and hotel space, and involving land occupied by the city's aging Exhibition Hall, said Stefan Johansson, WCI vice president.

Council members and WCI couldn't agree how to develop the prized site along the Caloosahatchee River.

WCI wants to "let the city make this a reality without the burden of our relationship," Johansson said.

However, the Bonita Springs-based company would be interested in revisiting the project after the council holds workshops and public hearings to decide exactly what it wants, Johansson said.

Councilman Mike Flanders said Monday he was ready to start negotiations with the firm that came in second — Antaramian Development Corp. — when WCI was listed as first choice back in October 2004.

The city's original request for developers' proposals stated that if negotiations fail with the first choice, the city "shall" negotiate with the second choice.

But Humphrey wants to start a new selection process, and objected strongly to Antaramian.

He said he believes other language in the agreement gives the council the ability to do that, and the "shall" is not necessarily mandatory in this case.

The city has been negotiating with WCI for almost two years on what the new development should look like, and what buildings should go where.

Humphrey said Monday he hopes WCI remains involved with the project.

At the recommendation of City Manager Anthony Shoemaker, the council decided its first step will be to have city staff gather and summarize everything they wanted in the project when working with WCI.

Flanders agreed, but also instructed Shoemaker to call Antaramian to at least see whether the company is still interested in the project.

Humphrey said he wants a "town hall meeting" to discuss consultant Andres Duany's plan for downtown, and how that affects what the council should call for in development agreements for the city-owned waterfront.

Duany, an internationally known city planner based in Miami, was hired by the city in 2001 to develop a master plan for downtown.

The council adopted his proposals, but Humphrey said that since then he's heard many different takes on what

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Duany really said about the best way to develop downtown.

Humphrey said he did not like Antaramian's original proposal, which called for an 18-story high-rise on the waterfront.

Flanders said Antaramian had the best plan for public spaces, and the 18-story tower in its first proposal was not something that had to be included.

"If we start over, we're going to lose a lot of time, and that's not necessary," Flanders said, adding a start from scratch could add several years to the project.

Humphrey said he thought the meetings and public workshops shouldn't add more than a year to the process.

WCI's project changed significantly over the course of negotiations with the council, and that would be part of the process with Antaramian, Flanders said.

It was the council's calls for changes that frustrated WCI, and company officials said in May they'd reached the limit on changes without having a contract.

Council members wanted the changes made first, feeling that once a contract was signed the city wouldn't have as much control over how the project turned out.

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