

Turquoise Place News In Orange Beach

City officials are negotiating with Turquoise Place developer Larry Wireman to restructure the package of park land and capital improvements that will be given to the public when his pair of condo towers is complete.

Wireman received approval to build four Gulf-front towers, but amid the condo market downturn has decided to only construct two. As such, the public benefits package he offered as part of his full plans will be reduced.

At the time Wireman's designs were approved, municipal law required developers to provide public benefits -- things like sidewalks, beach access, parks, street lights -- to justify projects that strayed from city zoning ordinances. The towers of Turquoise Place far exceeded what was then Orange Beach's building height limit.

For the first two towers Wireman agreed to give the city a 90-foot-wide public beach access with rest rooms, dune walkovers and parking spaces along with about 6 acres on Cotton Bayou on which he would build bathrooms and a fishing pier. He also pledged up to \$300,000 toward a fire station on the Cotton Bayou property, which sits across Alabama 182 from his high-rises.

With the second set of towers he agreed to give the city another 10 acres on Cotton Bayou. Because those condos won't be built, however, that deal is no longer valid, city officials said.

The tract the city is getting is irregularly shaped -- wide near the water with a narrow piece reaching up to Alabama 182 -- and dotted with wetlands. So city officials, now eyeing the property more for the fire station and less as a park, have asked Wireman if they could flip the parcel around so that there is more land on the street, City Administrator Jeff Moon said.

"From a practical standpoint I think the chief will tell you it makes more sense for it to be up by the road but we would like access to the water by means of an easement or a strip of land," Moon said Tuesday during a City Council work session.

Fire Chief Forney Howard said that Wireman's architect Forrest Daniell is drawing up plans for the fire station, aiming to make it match the glass-wrapped condo towers. The facility may wind up being two stories, with break-away walls on the ground level, so that in the event of a hurricane the station could quickly be put back into service, Howard said.

In addition to giving firefighters quick access to the Gulf-front, the station would be home to the department's fire boat, which could quickly get into the water via Cotton Bayou, Howard said.

The problem is that with construction costs rising rapidly over the past four years, \$300,000 is no longer enough to build a fire station, city officials said. Construction of Fire Station No. 2, which was completed in May 2006, cost \$672,000, with city employees doing most of the work, Howard said.

Simply by being nearer to the beach, the cost of the proposed station would be expected to exceed that, Moon said.

So city officials have suggested that Wireman drop his plans to build the fishing pier, parking spots and bathrooms on both sides of the road and instead put that money toward the fire house. Wireman said he

is open to doing so.

"It only makes sense to do what's been suggested," Mayor Pete Blalock said.

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