

Oak Ridger, The (TN)

Estimated printed pages: 3

January 2, 2008

Section: News

Oak Ridge still needs retail, officials say

John Huotari John.huotari@oakridger.com

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first of a two-part end-of-2007 series focusing on top Oak Ridge city government stories. The Oak Ridger talked to the seven City Council members and former Mayor David Bradshaw. In the first part, we look at the failed Crestpointe project and Oak Ridge's retail future.

Oak Ridge still suffers from a relative lack of shopping opportunities, current and former city officials said at the end of 2007.

Some conditions have changed since Oak Ridge voters in June rejected the use of public funds for a \$65 million shopping center atop Pine Ridge. For example, Tractor Supply Co. intends to open a store at the former Food City grocery in east Oak Ridge.

But the overall retail picture is not as good as it could be, officials said.

"We are still hurting when it comes to retail choice," said David Bradshaw, former Oak Ridger mayor.

He was one of three Oak Ridge City Council members who did not seek re-election in the June 5 municipal election. Besides the Council seats, the election also included the referendum on the use of up to \$6 million in general obligation bonds for the Pine Ridge shopping center, known as Crestpointe of Oak Ridge.

"It's disappointing that we're still talking about it when others around us are breaking ground," said Jane Miller, Oak Ridge's mayor pro tem.

After the June referendum, Oak Ridge officials proposed for Crestpointe an alternative financing mechanism called tax increment financing, essentially a "Plan B." But since then, Target, the expected Crestpointe anchor, has announced that it does not plan to build a store in Oak Ridge.

"I'm not sure we Council people have a 'Plan C,'" Oak Ridge City Councilman Willie Golden said.

Although they don't have a "crystal ball" to see the future, current and former Council members generally pointed to the Oak Ridge City Center, also known as the mall, as the most likely or logical place for new retail development.

"It's certainly our prime location in Oak Ridge," City Councilman Tom Hayes said.

During the Crestpointe debate, three locations outside the former mall property were brought forward as potential retail development sites.

Officials said a successful mall redevelopment could bring "good retail" — and its accompanying tax revenues — and revitalize the heart of the city.

"I think we can have a very vibrant center city in Oak Ridge," City Councilman Charlie Hensley said.

However, City Center redevelopment plans have been delayed several times, leading residents to question when anything significant will happen there.

Still, Oak Ridge Mayor Tom Beehan said he has had conversations with mall redevelopers and is now more hopeful

about the project than he has been in a long time.

“The telling will come in the first quarter of 2008,” Beehan said.

Council members said the city can help create an attractive retail environment, but the free market has to be “the driver.” Investing millions in a particular project might not be the best use of money and might give an unfair advantage to a particular developer, Oak Ridge City Councilman David Mosby said.

“As much as everyone wants retail to develop in Oak Ridge, I don’t think the city’s calling, if you will, is to bring retail to this community,” he said.

Oak Ridge City Councilwoman Ellen Smith said there have been some recent encouraging retail developments, but the city “can’t force people to be entrepreneurs.”

Council members said Oak Ridge has an under-served retail market, and they hope that retailers see the potential. Several said retail development could be a top priority —?or the top priority — in a city “vision” proposed by Beehan.

Smith and Hensley took a trip to Chattanooga in November to find out, among other things, how officials there were able to successfully redevelop the city’s downtown and waterfront.

In Chattanooga, The RiverCity Company, a private, non-profit organization, worked with the private sector and city and county governments to spur economic development and create public spaces.

“It seems to have been a key ingredient,” Smith said, referring to the partnership.

Hensley said cities interested in redevelopment have “to be willing to spend resources on the front end and be willing to create an environment that is attractive to businesses.”

John Huotari can be contacted at (865) 220-5533.

/

/

Copyright 2008 The Oak Ridger. All Rights Reserved.