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Tallahassee residents pushing for more action on Gaines revitalization

Committee says narrowing street crucial to project's momentum

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The revitalization of Gaines Street, part of Tallahassee's goal to transform downtown into an 18-hour destination, has seen progress the past few months, and a group of residents wants to keep the momentum going.

They want to jump-start the conversion of Gaines from a four-lane thoroughfare to a two-lane street that's friendly to walkers and bike riders.

On Wednesday, city commissioners will get an update on two Gaines projects — a mix of artists' lofts and studios and a traditional mix of housing and retail. The developers of both projects are interested in the same city-owned property at Gay Street, and commissioners could decide which one gets the site.

More developers could become interested in Gaines once it's converted in 2013 to a two-lane street, members of the Gaines Street Vitalization Committee say. On Thursday, residents will share their concerns with the city's Public Works Department.

"I think the developers are a little reluctant to go ahead with any planning on Gaines Street," committee member Ruth Wharton said, "until they see what's actually going to happen on that road."

Others caution that narrowing Gaines before other roads are ready to take some of the 28,000 vehicles that use it every day could spell disaster. City commissioners are set to decide April 23 whether to take over Gaines Street from the state.

"I understand wanting to keep the momentum," said Gabe Menendez, director of public works. "But if we don't do this right, we can stall the project for a long time if we create gridlock."

Getting Gaines going

The discussions come after a flurry of Gaines Street-related activity the past few weeks and months.

After several community members spoke out last spring about the apparent lack of progress, the city revamped the citizens committee into a mix of community activists, business owners and people with experience in real estate.

Working with the citizens committee and a group of community leaders called Get Gaines Going, the city and the Community Redevelopment Agency made several improvements.

They include tearing down the Chevron station, Late Night Library and Bill's Bookstore; offering a \$35,000 grant for a sculpture garden at Railroad Square; improving Doug Burnett Park on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard; crafting design standards for Gaines Street; and creating incentives for property owners to improve their facades.

They've also started to hear from more developers interested in Gaines Street.

Competition for the city-owned Gay Street site is hotter than ever. The developers of Arts on Gaines — 50 units of affordable live/work units for artists with a 75,000-square-foot arts incubator — are scheduled to make their case at Wednesday's meeting.

Meanwhile, Cortland Partners of Atlanta have proposed building 282 residential units on top of 22,500 square feet of retail space. They have offered the city \$4.1 million to buy the 4.3 acres that the city bought for \$3.5 million. Artspace, Arts on Gaines' nonprofit developer, only wants half the site but has not offered to pay for it.

Also, two hotels have shown an interest in city-owned lots at the east end of the street, said Roxanne Manning, who heads Gaines Street efforts for the city.

Others have already made the jump to Gaines. Wood + Partners Inc., a landscape architecture and planning firm, opened a storefront at Copeland and Madison streets just north of Gaines Street a year and a half ago.

But Gaines Street remains a tough sell. Two years after it opened at Railroad Avenue, the Marriott Hotel's ground-floor retail space is vacant.

"Right now, we're at the hardest part of a redevelopment project because we don't have those pioneers yet," Manning said. "If we can keep the momentum we've had in the past few months, I think we'll see some improvements."

Some developers agree that Gaines Street's conversion could drive interest.

If developers "are seeing the city is taking a step towards improving (the street) that definitely starts the ball on everybody getting a little bit more interested," said Pete Ganci, whose firm has proposed a 20-unit student condo set to open by summer 2009 next to the Marriott.

Mayor John Marks said he was open to reconsidering all options on Gaines Street. Whatever commissioners decide, Gaines Street stakeholders agree something big needs to happen.

"If people don't deliver something on Gaines Street pretty soon," Wharton said, "no one is going to want to hear about it anymore."