

Developers vie for vacant land in West Palm Beach's south end to build apartments, retail



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West Palm Beach
ITN Submission: February 9, 2021

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Three finalists are vying to develop a long-vacant piece of prime real estate in West Palm Beach's south end — a property considered a key gateway to the city with waterfront along the C-51 canal.

A winning bid to transform the city-owned land with apartments, retail space, and a makeover of the scruffy waterway for kayak and paddleboard launches, is expected to be announced in early May.

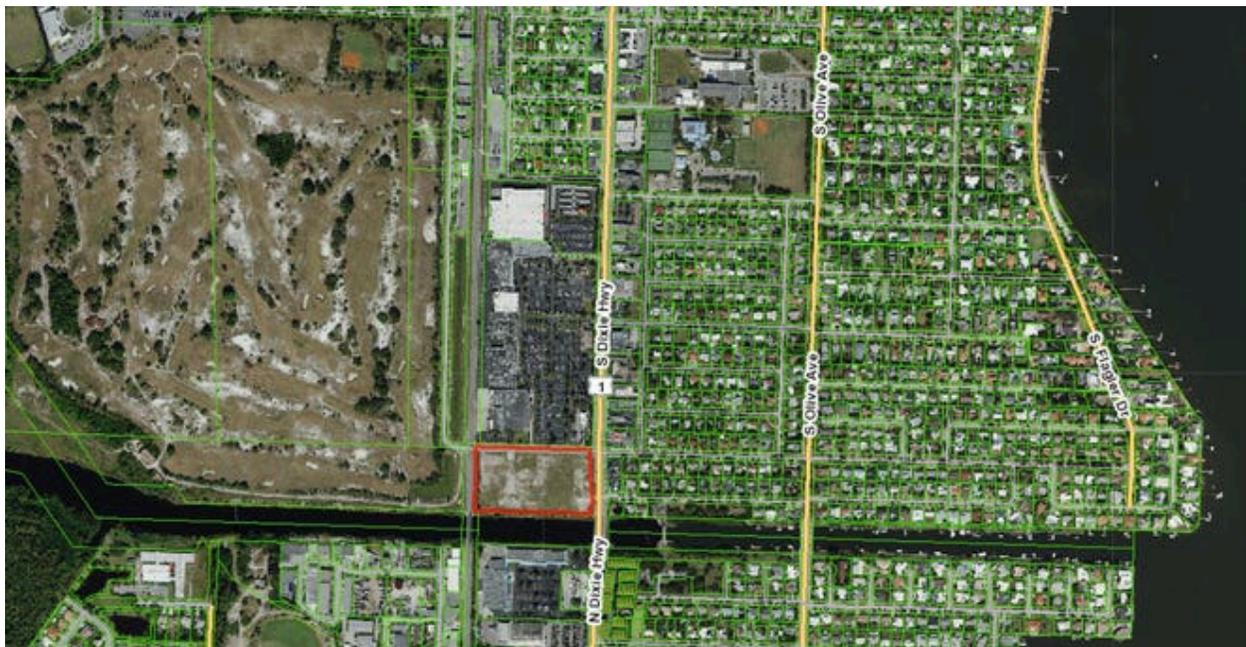
The nearly 7-acre parcel at 8111 S. Dixie Highway once had an International House of Pancakes on it but has been sand and scrub since at least 2012 when the city bought the land.

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City commissioners whittled a six-applicant field to three in December, including Flagler Realty & Development Inc., Blueway Partners and the Kaufman Lynn and Falcone Group.

“This is a very special and important piece of property not only within the city but that the city owns,” said West Palm Beach Commissioner Christina Lambert at the December meeting. “I’m excited to see this developed.”



The city issued an Invitation to Negotiate in late 2020, which includes bargaining with the developers over whether they will ultimately buy or lease

the property. The city's goal is to lease the land while it's under construction and sell it to the developer once completed.

It also means that construction timelines and original presentations may be tweaked during negotiations. All of the proposals include some apartments set aside for affordable housing, and plans for water access that will need approval from the South Florida Water Management District.

Although the land is on the canal, there is no entrance to the Intracoastal waterway because of a flood control structure at Spillway Park.

The property, whose total market value is \$2.78 million, according to the Palm Beach County Property Appraiser, is adjacent to the West Palm Beach golf course.

The beleaguered course, which was closed in 2015, is undergoing a renovation by PGA of America. One of the city's requests from developers of 8111 South Dixie Highway was to create a connection to the course.

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Golf cart parking and a plan for 20 short-term rentals and cottages targeting golf enthusiasts was pitched by the Kaufmann Lynn and Falcone Group. Flagler Realty & Development is proposing rental apartments set aside for golf course employees and an agreement with PGA of America to let residents eat at the golf course restaurant.

And Blueway Partners is working on creating a philanthropic youth golf group at the course, as well as a job placement program for graduates of a culinary training program that will be part of the overall development.



The three developers touted their local connections to West Palm Beach.

Patrick Koenig, Flagler Realty & Development co-founder, said he and his partners live in or near the south end of West Palm Beach and feel a responsibility to provide a vibrant landmark development for the community. A key element to Flagler's design includes a national grocery chain to anchor the development and attract retail tenants.



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“That will provide sustainability to the other local stores,” Koenig said about the market. “The retail doesn’t work without a major tenant.”

The Palm Coast Plaza, a strip mall just north of the property, is a smattering of vacant storefronts, a Planet Fitness and a Winn Dixie grocery store. Koenig said the grocery store attached to his project would be about half the size of the Winn Dixie.

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Flagler Development engineered the partnership that turned the historic First Federal Savings and Loan building on Southern Boulevard into a class 7-Eleven. On the 8111 South Dixie property, Flagler would partner with Woodfield Development, which built the Oversea at Flagler Banyan Square apartments in downtown West Palm Beach.

Adam Zeidel, principal of Blueway Partners, was raised in the south end and learned about the city’s push to develop the 8111 land while he was staying with his parents during the pandemic.



Zeidel, whose real estate development firm Coconut Properties is in New York, said his design stands out because parking is tucked underneath the residential building. He’s also pulling in childhood friends on the project, including Ben Lubin, who owns The Blind Monk restaurant and wine bar in downtown West Palm Beach.

“Seventy percent of our site is either green or publicly accessible open space,” Zeidel said. “People I the south end will have something in their backyard with landscaped open spaces, art, restaurants and shopping.”

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Delray Beach-based Kaufman Lynn and Falcone Group is pitching shops along Dixie Highway, an open plaza with a monument signaling that the property is the entrance to West Palm Beach.

The group also said it has been in contact with Palm Coast Plaza owner Alberto Micha Buzali about options for his property.

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“Projects like this are special endeavors,” said Mike Kaufman, founder and CEO of Kaufman Lynn at the December presentation to the city commission. “It gives companies a higher purpose and we are here to commit to that higher purpose.”

South end residents are eager to see the final proposal.

Homeowner Ava Van de Water said while she understands apartments are necessary to make the project financially feasible for the developers, she'd like to see winding shops and art galleries similar to the nooks and crannies found on Worth Avenue in Palm Beach.

“Now, you get in your car, go to a restaurant in West Palm Beach, and then get back in your car and go home,” she said. “I'd like a destination for the neighborhood where you want to wonder around and look at art and interesting shops.”

Kimberly Miller is a veteran journalist for The Palm Beach Post, part of the USA Today Network of Florida. She covers real estate and how growth affects South Florida's environment. If you have any news tips, please send them to kmiller@pbpost.com.