

A jewel for the Neck

Blighted area would be transformed into residential community

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A broad stretch of industrial wasteland in the Charleston Neck Area could be transformed into an urban neighborhood of shops, offices, hotels and up to 4,400 homes under the new concept plan for the Magnolia development.

The 216-acre development is a bold initiative to reclaim the land that borders the Ashley River and Interstate 26, where phosphate fertilizer factories and a wood treatment plant once dominated — and heavily polluted — the landscape.

Magnolia would be what's known as an urban infill project, a plan to redevelop within a city rather than replacing green spaces with new suburban development. Other examples include the Noisette Co. plan to build 3,000 homes on the northern tip of the former Navy Base in North Charleston and Charleston's plan to redevelop Ansonborough Field.

State regulators said it would be the single largest redevelopment of its kind in South Carolina.

The development partners have been working for years with community and preservation groups, adjoining communities, environmental regulators and Charleston officials to plan for Magnolia. On Tuesday, the concept plan for the development goes before the city Planning Commission, where little opposition is expected.

What's the plan?

Along the eastern banks of the Ashley River, Magnolia Development LLC would build public parks and a marina. A wide pedestrian and bike path would loop the community, creating new access to the river for residents of the small, adjoining communities of Rosemont and Silver Hill.

Between the river and the upper reaches of King Street, Magnolia would boast some of the tallest new buildings in Charleston, up to 120 feet, plus a public park and a densely built community of smaller buildings modeled on the scale of the lower peninsula, with blocks and alleys laid out for foot traffic and an active street life.

Sustainable building concepts, such as rainwater collection and green roofs, would be incorporated into building design, potentially creating one of the region's greenest communities in an area that's among the most environmentally challenged. Cherokee Investment Partners, a North Carolina private equity firm that specializes in redeveloping polluted sites, is financing most of the project.

The plan incorporates most of the development ideals espoused by Charleston Mayor Joe Riley and his city planners: Using infill projects to reduce sprawl, creating walkable communities where people can live, work and shop, and focusing on sustainable building practices that come partially in response to concerns about global warming.

The new urbanist design concepts were inspired by established, densely packed neighborhoods from across the country. Planners studied the layout of quiet, residential blocks in Savannah and street-side shopping areas in downtown Boston. The development's main street, called Grand Boulevard, was based on downtown King Street.

"There's a lot of effort, with the streets, to reproduce the urban feel of Charleston," Magnolia Development partner Robert Clement said.

Transportation options

Mass transit is a key feature of new urbanism, and Magnolia Development and the city support the idea of creating a passenger rail service between Charleston and Summerville that potentially could serve the new development.

The Magnolia developers also have promoted the idea of a new light-rail trolley line to downtown Charleston, but have found limited support for the expensive proposition.

"We still do have two trolley cars in storage," Magnolia Development partner Craig Briner said. "I feel a little like Don Quixote on that one."

To connect the new development to Interstate 26 and the city, Magnolia Development would build a bridge across the marsh at the southern end of the site, to access the highway at Heriot Street. Four connections also would be made to the King Street extension.

The developers and city planners also have advocated moving Interstate 26, shifting to the east so that it would not separate residential communities as it does now. The thinking was that the elevated section of the highway was nearing the end of its useful life and would need to be replaced anyway.

But recent studies found that the structural integrity of the highway remains sound, according to Christopher Morgan, director of Charleston's Planning Division.

"That means the viability of moving I-26 is a little farther out than in the Neck Plan," he said. "It's not something that will happen in the near future."

The 1993 Charleston Neck Plan was a planning document developed after extensive community meetings, which established some of the standards used in the Magnolia plan.

"We sat down in 2003 for eight consecutive Saturdays and talked about what we wanted to see from this development, and the developers have stayed true to that," said Charleston Councilman Jimmy Gallant, who represents the area.

"For the last five years, we've been working on the concept, the impact," he said. "I'm pretty much satisfied with what's going to the commission next week."

Affordable housing

Magnolia Development says that 15 percent of the residential units will be "affordable housing" that could be meant for first-time home buyers, senior citizens or people who meet income guidelines.

In Charleston, "affordable housing" typically is priced for middle-income families.

"We've got to have diverse housing that allows everyone to live together," Clement said.

Affordable units would be available for rent and for sale, possibly in conjunction with nonprofit housing organizations and the city.

The developers also created a deal to help make sure that housing remains affordable in the neighboring communities, where residents had been worried that their property taxes would skyrocket because of Magnolia and that they would be forced to move.

The current residents' biggest fear is no longer being able to afford their homes, the Rev. Sidney Davis said. The community activist said he wants to avoid what happened at neighborhoods such as Radcliffborough, which he says no longer has a mix of backgrounds.

"I'm 75 years old, and every meeting that I went to, I told them 'You all do what you want to do, but just let me stay up here until death,' " said Elouise Eady, president of the Silver Hill/Magnolia Neighborhood Association.

In response to neighborhood concerns, Gallant said the developers agreed to create a \$250,000 Stay Put initiative, which would compensate homeowners for the possible increases in their property taxes. The fund will reimburse homeowners who meet income requirements each year for property taxes that exceed their 2004 bills.

"That way, if someone who lives there wants to stay there, they can," Davis said.

The first round of checks will go out to about 70 homeowners next week. Next year, statewide property tax reforms that were approved after the Stay Put Initiative will reduce homeowners' property tax bills, making the tax relief fund unnecessary in the near term.

Challenges remain

The concept plan that will go before Charleston's Planning Commission is essentially the blueprint for streets, utility lines and other infrastructure. Detailed subdivision plans will come later.

Magnolia Development hopes to start work on roads and the bridge across the marsh later this year, and begin building construction next year, but some hurdles remain.

Environmental cleanup work remains an issue on the site, which is home to three properties covered by the federal Superfund law and at least 15 with cleanup plans regulated by the state.

Also, despite the relocation of most industrial companies from the Magnolia site, at least two key pieces of land still are in the hands of companies that have not struck a deal with the developer.

Parker Marine Contracting Corp. owns about eight acres of land along the Ashley River at the end of Braswell Street. The company makes cement pilings that support building construction in the tri-county area.

During the company's busiest days, as many as 10 cement trucks deliver to the site. The beams can measure up to 100 feet in length, and the semitrucks that deliver them to construction sites often require police escorts.

Company President Tommy Parker said he plans to formally object to the development because it would change the network of roads that lead to his property. The redesign would make it harder for trucks to make their deliveries.

A second company, Benson, N.C.-based Robin Hood Trucking Inc., sits on a two-acre parcel in the middle of the development on Milford Street. Company President Robbie Hood said his plans to move to Macalloy fell through and that he'll think about relocating as the development progresses.

"I think it's a great idea for the city. I think the city needs it," he said. "But it's not the place for us."

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