

Cultural arts district, new subdivision at I-12 & LA 21 clear parish zoning

A proposal to create a cultural arts district (CAD), including a performing arts center and a children's museum, has cleared the St. Tammany Parish Zoning Commission with unanimous support and is set for possible consideration by the Parish Council at their next meeting on Thursday, April 3.

Zoning for the CAD, to be located south of Covington between the eastern edge of the Nord du Lac shopping center and the Tchefuncte River, was part of a two-prong rezoning request considered by the Zoning Commission on March 4. The entire tract sits in the northeast quadrant of Interstate 12 and Louisiana 21.

The petitioner – developer Bruce Wainer, partner of Wainer Companies, which is part of All State Financial Company – requested rezoning for two tracts of land bordered on the east by the Tchefuncte River and located north of Pinnacle Parkway and south of Flowers Estates South subdivision. One request sought to rezone the 48.32-acre parcel immediately to the north of Pinnacle Parkway from A-3 suburban district and HC-3 highway commercial to PBC-1 planned business center and HC-3. The second request asked that the 80.37-acre parcel closest to Flowers Estates be rezoned from A-3, A-4 single-family residential district and HC-3 to A-4A single-family residential district, which permits four residential units per acre.

Attorney Jeff Schoen, representing Wainer, said the majority of the 48-acre parcel would be donated to parish government to be developed as a CAD.

Parish President Pat Brister, in announcing her administration's vision for the district in 2013 said it would be home to a 2,200-seat performing arts center and the Children's Museum of St. Tammany (CMST), a 20,000-square-foot, hands-on learning center that has been

in the works since 2003 and was originally slated for the Koop Drive Tammany Trace Trailhead. Other amenities have also been mentioned for the district, including an outdoor amphitheater, a nature and wildlife preserve, and nature trails.

Wainer will retain ownership of two outparcels included in the 48 acres for a full-service hotel and adjacent restaurant.

The 80.37 acres closest to Flowers Estates will be a residential development of about 146 lots, for a density of 1.7 lots per acre. Schoen said there will be a 100-foot no-cut buffer between the new subdivision and Flowers Estates and its access will be from Pinnacle Parkway and not through Flowers Estates.

Schoen also assured the commission that 70 acres of the total 128.69 acres would be set aside for a nature conservancy, since there are considerable wetlands in the area. He also said there were no plans for construction of a bulkhead or marina on the Tchefuncte River.

Sandra Slifer, representing the Association of Associations, a coalition of neighborhood organizations along the LA 21 corridor, said Schoen had met with their group in February and received its endorsement for the project.

However, two residents of the Old Landing section of Covington, which sits across the river from the proposed project, objected to the rezoning, saying run-off from the developments would increase the likelihood of flooding in Old Landing.

One of the residents, Randy Robin, who lives on South America Street, said no action should be taken on the rezoning requests until a hydrological study is done to determine the amount of runoff the developments would generate. Old Landing is already beset by drainage problems, he said, and the proposed projects will exacerbate the problem.

Brian Berns, also from

Old Landing, was not swayed by Schoen's assurance that a bulkhead or marina on the Tchefuncte was not part of the projects, saying that such structures, along with the hotel and restaurant, would worsen flooding in his neighborhood.

Schoen said the two men were "putting the cart before the horse. Before we can do a hydrological study, the land must first be rezoned," he said. "The zoning process comes first, then the planning process."

Commissioner Loy R. "Pug" Loren cautioned that plans for the Nord du Lac shopping center, which was billed at the time of its rezoning as a "high-end lifestyle center," didn't come to be. "Plans don't always work out the way you think (they will)," he said, noting that a part of the center was never completed and that the stores it has so far attracted do not match with what was originally proposed. "Now, you plan to do a conservancy. I'd like to see a more solid plan for the conservancy."

Schoen responded to this concern by saying the PBC zoning is more restrictive than the highway commercial classifications.

The rezoning requests now go to the Parish Council for final consideration, and are expected to be voted on at the council's April 3 meeting.

Fundraising for the CMST, a project of the Junior League of Greater Covington in partnership with St. Tammany Parish government, has been ongoing for a number of years, primarily through the museum board's annual Celebration! gala.

This year's event, featuring music, samplings from area restaurants, imaginative decorations and silent and live auctions, is set for this Sunday, March 23, at the Castine Center. For tickets or more information, visit cmstkids.org.

More than \$620,000 has been raised at the past six Celebration! events, museum officials have said.