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Merton Homes seeks to develop field

Union Place will feature geothermal energy

BY PAT FERRIER

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The large empty field behind McDonald's on North College Avenue will one day sprout up to 80 affordable homes, commercial development and cutting-edge environmental technology in an area considered blighted.

Merton Homes is seeking approval - and \$2.2 million - from the city's Urban Renewal Authority to develop the 10-acre field in north Fort Collins.

The project, while still morphing, includes eight single-family homes, 10 duplex units, 40 multifamily townhomes and three mixed-use commercial buildings with living units above.

Proposed by developer Donna Merton of Merton Homes, Union Place will be heated and cooled by geothermal energy, the first geothermal project of this magnitude in the city.

Tonight, the City Council, acting as the Urban Renewal Authority, will consider approving the tax-increment financing for the project, including street improvements on Mason Street and Willox Lane.

State law allows an urban-renewal authority to retain property taxes generated within a specific area above a base amount. The funding tool, known as tax-increment financing, must be used for public improvements in the urban-renewal area.

The project is getting high praise from city planners and the North College URA advisory group.

Coupled with the proposed King Soopers marketplace on the northeast corner of North College and Willox and a new home for the Rocky Mountain Innovation Initiative, or RMI2, off Vine Street, North College is looking at \$50 million in new development.

"That's very positive for an area that hasn't seen a lot of development," advisory board member and North College business owner Ron Lautzenheiser said.

"That's what we need up here. When you put that housing development next to the new shopping center that will absorb 300 to 400 people relative to jobs ... that's another reason to be very optimistic in that type of project," Lautzenheiser said.

Access to the site would be from Willox Lane and a future Mason Street extension.

"This is an excellent example of what the URA is seeking," said Christina Vincent, an urban-renewal authority planner. "Not only does it have sustainable features for technology that aren't done in a lot of places, but it is providing housing and a good portion of that being affordable in a section of town that really needs it," she said.

In addition to geothermal heating, Union Place is considering features that would eliminate storm

runoff.

"We really want to support this project," Vincent said. "You not only have the consumer benefit of a large marketplace project that puts more retail and commercial in the community but consumers that will help facilitate some of that symbiotic relationship."

Merton said she expects to submit preliminary development plans to the city in the next two weeks.

Developer and Realtor Mike Jensen has purchased 10 of the 80 lots, and Habitat for Humanity plans to buy four, Merton said.

Merton Homes marketing manager Brad Duckham said home prices will be "very competitive ... nothing that sticks out like a pink flamingo." The top price would be in the mid-\$200,000s.

Union Place can only enhance the customer and employee base for North College Marketplace, said Eric Holsapple of Loveland Commercial LLC, which is developing the King Soopers-anchored project.

"I see it as a great asset," said Holsapple, who expects to start construction on the northeast corner of Willox and North College Avenue in April.

Additional Facts

Interested?

> The Fort Collins City Council, acting as the Urban Renewal Authority, will discuss tax increment financing for Union Place tonight in the City Council Chambers, 300 LaPorte Ave.

> The city's planning department will host a neighborhood meeting about the plans at 6:30 p.m. Monday in the community room at the city office building, 215 N. Mason St. Information: 221-6750.
