

## Sylacauga Council hears retail development proposal

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SYLACAUGA – A new retail center, complete with food, shopping and a movie theater, could open in Sylacauga by fall 2011, according to developers.

Representatives of Cullman-based Drinkard Development presented their plan for the city owned land on U.S. 280 at a called city council meeting Tuesday. Former Chamber of Commerce director Joe Richardson said people had been working on the

project for nearly two years to bring it to Sylacauga.

“It represents about \$1 million in sales tax revenue as well as more than 300 jobs,” Richardson said. “I definitely think it is something that the public will support.”

Jason Grimmatt of Drinkard also said they estimated the retail center would generate around \$35 million in sales per year and employ 335 people. Grimmatt presented layouts of the proposed center with a TJ Maxx, Tractor Supply, Verizon Wireless and several other retail stores to the council and the near capacity audience in the council chambers.

He said Drinkard was a “preferred developer” for the retailers he listed.

“The only reason we are here today is because we are not at the point where we are still fishing,” he said. “We have got really strong prospects with these people. We can’t publicly announce all of them, but you can get an idea of who we deal with.”

Mayor Sam Wright opened the meeting by thanking the developers involved and recognized Drinkard’s owner and founder, Roy Drinkard. Wright also credited council member Walter Jacobson for his involvement in bringing the developers to the city.

Jacobson said confidentiality agreements prevented anyone from speaking about the project until Tuesday. He said the next step for the council would be to look at the costs of getting everything in place.

“We will sit down with Drinkard and begin to talk about the different options that may be available to make this a reality,” Jacobson said. “About the only way these things get done is through some form of partnership. The days of someone coming in and building something for you are pretty much gone.”

One of the centerpieces to the center, which would be located next to Wal-Mart, was a Carmike Cinemas 8 or 10 screen movie complex. Grimmatt said the theater would be similar to the one built in Cullman, which was around 30,000 square feet and featured the newest technologies in picture and sound.

The center would also include a separate “food court” area, a 178,000 square foot

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shopping center and a large building for Tractor Supply or another retailer.

Representatives from the development firm Retail Specialists also attended the meeting. Brooks Corr of the group said they represented the city on the sale of the land and would help facilitate the leasing of the center for Drinkard.

Grimmett said Drinkard Development focused strictly on small-market areas. He said the group planned on joining the local Chamber and staying involved in the area.

Drinkard representatives said the company began in 1967 and had developments across seven states. They also said more than 98 percent of all spaces were leased in their finished developments.

Roy Drinkard said it was important to him that his company develops “relationships” with the community.

“I appreciate the warmth here that I have felt,” he said. “I’m from a small town, just like the places where we work. Thank you for the invitation to be here. I feel very much at home.”

Grimmett said he believed the retail center could help keep people from leaving town to shop and “enjoy where they live.”

“We really feel like if you come in with the right kind of development where it is a destination, that you will get the folks who are outside Birmingham coming to here,” Grimmett said. “I think you have a good centerpiece here, you have the downtown. You can bring people back in and get them to stay in Sylacauga (to shop), and you don’t have to go to Birmingham to see a movie.”

After the meeting, council president Jim Heigl spoke about the presentation. He said the increased tax revenue and new retail opportunities for residents would be “a big plus” for the city.

Heigl also said he was impressed by the developers’ efforts to seek out retailers before construction was underway.

“From what I gathered, what they are going to build will already be contracted for (by businesses) as soon as they get the OK,” he said. “They are not just going to put up buildings and hope somebody comes here, they will have the buildings filled before they begin.”

Both Heigl and Jacobson said discussions between the council on the matter would begin within the month.

Richardson worked to bring the developers to the city until he resigned as Chamber director. He said people in the area needed to let the council know they are for the proposed retail area.

“You don’t have this opportunity very often, particularly in this economy,” Richardson said. “A lot of people deserve a lot of credit. But that’s not what it is about. It is about what is best for our community. This is a project that will really set us apart from a lot of communities our size, and the council needs to get on board.”