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Boca Raton: Plan to build Mizner condo in phases reawakens opposition

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Just over one year ago, antagonists in the battle over the proposed luxury condo on Southeast Mizner Boulevard struck a deal.

Developer El-Ad National Properties made concessions on building design, landscaping and setbacks that won over project opponents. After the Boca Raton City Council gave its unanimous approval, Amnon Safran, then El-Ad's chief executive, fist bumped the five council members.

Fourteen months later, that kumbaya moment has given way to new acrimony.

El-Ad is seeking approval to build the 384-unit project in two phases. Residents of the neighboring Townsend Place condos contend — and city records and even El-Ad's submission to the city agree — that the city's 2017 approval was based in part on the project's being built in a single phase.

Phase 1 would consist of 140 condos in one tower built on the northern portion of the nearly 9-acre site. Phase 2 would be 244 units in two towers on the southern end. The 246 Mizner on the Green townhouses, which would give way to the redevelopment, also would be torn down in two phases — 115 in Phase 1 and 131 in Phase 2.

El-Ad promises to fulfill last year's promises to enhance the landscaping, including a wide pedestrian promenade along the boulevard and a larger landscaped buffer zone between the project and Townsend Place.

But Townsend Place residents aren't sure that will happen right away. The developer's submission says "to the maximum extent practicable."

Another proposed change is adding valet parking, though a condition of approval last year said that was not allowed. Townsend Place residents and those active in the BocaBeautiful blog say the request is "bait and switch."

"It was agreed this was it. It was agreed there would be no changes," said Norman Waxman, a member of the Townsend Place board.

John Gore, president of BocaBeautiful and a former Townsend Place resident, said his concern is the two phases.

"Now they are saying 'We are not going to build it as a single building,'" he said. "'We will build some and see how that sells and then we will see about the rest.'"

If El-Ad decides to build only one phase, it will have one condo tower and the remnants of the old townhouses — an outcome no one wants.

Architect Doug Mummaw, who sided with Townsend Place residents in the previous battle, said he was "displeased" with what El-Ad is now proposing for the ALINA Residences Boca Raton, formerly known as Mizner 200.

If a second phase is never built, "you will end up with half of a beautiful project and the Mizner on the Green townhouses," he said. "Imagine what that would look like."

Major downtown landowner Investments Limited also negotiated for design changes because the project would have blocked views from Royal Palm Place, which the company wants to redevelop. A project redesign satisfied the company.

Robert Eisen of Investments Limited said he doesn't yet know what the company's position will be on El-Ad's requests. But he has qualms. "I think it is obvious they want to minimize their exposure if [condo sales] turn out badly," he said.

Noam Ziv, El-Ad's executive director of development, insisted the project remains as agreed to — three towers with 384 units and the same architectural design and landscaping.

But, he said, "we never intended to build all three [towers] in one shot. It would saturate the market."

He described the phasing request as a "technical process" rather than a change.

Ziv said he has made a concession to city staffers, who asked him not to do the landscaping in phases. "We agreed to do the landscaping in front of the second phase before we [build] the second phase," he said.

"There is some limitation because the [townhouses] are there," he conceded.

If for some reason the second phase is not built, Townsend Place residents should be pleased because the project would not interfere with their eastward views, he said.

Ziv said his representatives have met with Eisen and individually with members of the City Council. Eisen was noncommittal and council members “are not unified in their opinion,” he said.

Waxman said Townsend Place president Craig Sherman heard from an El-Ad representative a few months ago and said the condo board would “absolutely not” support the developer’s plans.

The city has not set a date when the Planning and Zoning Board will hear El-Ad’s request regarding phasing and valet parking — the first step to city approval or disapproval. It is not clear if the landscaping plans will come before the board.

The City Council also must consider the requests.

While the city has not given its approval, El-Ad is pressing forward. The project debuted its new name last month, and Douglas Elliman is handling sales and marketing. The units range from just under \$1 million to \$6 million.

El-Ad is constructing a sales office on the Mizner on the Green property and has a preview center in Mizner Park. At the end of September, El-Ad had one signed contract for purchase, Ziv said.

“We could not be happier with the reaction we’re getting from the market,” he said.

El-Ad, part of the Elad Group, has moved its local headquarters to the Bank of America building at 150 E. Palmetto Park Road. The company has four other rental communities in Boca Raton: Camino Real, Tuscany Point, Somerset Place, and Savannah Place.

“The most exciting place to be now is downtown Boca,” Ziv said. “We want to be close to the action.” With five properties already in the city, “it made sense to call Boca home.”

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