

Project on the Poudre draws fire



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FORT COLLINS — The developer of a proposed office building and restaurant that would overlook the Poudre River is bracing for the possibility of a formal appeal from environmentalists.

The project, called Block One, faces an important administrative hearing March 12. If it clears that hurdle, it then needs City Council approval.

Save the Poudre Director Gary Wockner said his group is concerned about how close the \$9 million project would be built to the river.

“This kind of massive building with a busy restaurant just feet from the river tries to exploit this public natural resource for private profit and would irrevocably harm the sensitive ecology river corridor,” Wockner said in an email.

Rich Shannon of Pinnacle Consulting Group, a real estate consulting firm, has been trying to raise community support for the project, encouraging residents to write letters and speak in support of the project at the administrative hearing.

The project is the brainchild of local father-and-son entrepreneur team Kent and Jonathan O’Neil, whose company, Encompass Technologies, has outgrown its current headquarters at 324 Jefferson St. in Fort Collins.

The O’Neils want to build new office space for their company, as well as multi-family units and an underground parking structure. In all, the development will total 36,990 square feet and will include space for 73 vehicles, according to project plans.

If approved, the project would be built at 418 Linden St., which is bordered on the east by the Poudre. The site was formerly inhabited by a concrete batch plant, but now only concrete pads sit on the property.

The one-acre parcel has historical significance to Fort Collins, as it was the location of the original plat of Fort Collins. This is where the Block One project gets its name.

An important part of the developers’ plan is to feature a restaurant by the river, which would be the first of its kind in Fort Collins.

In most cases, city land-use code prevents developments from getting too close to the river. The Linden Street location, though, allows for exceptions to that rule. The project sits inside the city’s river redevelopment district, which is exempt from a 300-foot river development buffer imposed in most of the rest of the city, according to Ted Shepard, the city planner assigned to the project.

The boundaries of the district are Jefferson Street, Willow Street, Lincoln Street and the Poudre River, Shepard

said.

In the process of preparing the project's plans, the development team went to great pains to make sure that all of the city's land-use requirements were met, Jonathan O'Neil said.

As a result, O'Neil said, he is confident that the team will be prepared for an appeal, should one be filed.

Part of the work included completing an ecological characterization study to determine how the project might impact the nearby natural area. Cedar Creek Associates of Fort Collins completed the study.

The study notes that activity stemming from the concrete plant that previously existed on the property will mean minimal impacts to the natural environment.

"Development of the Block One parcel would result in relatively minor additional impacts to the Poudre River corridor beyond those that have already occurred from existing disturbance and development," the study says.

More specifically, the study looks at the plant species surrounding the development site and the presence of wildlife in the area.

"Wildlife use of the Block One site is minimal to nonexistent because of past disturbance and lack of vegetation cover," according to the study.

The study does report that the trees near the site provide a seasonal home to various songbirds, and that waterfowl use nearby portions of the river for movement and feeding. To mitigate the impact on birds nesting in the trees, the study recommends that the developers avoid removing or pruning any trees during the birds' nesting season, from April 1 to July 31.

"The Block One site does not support any native vegetation, and significant trees are restricted to the riverbank adjacent to the east property boundary," Cedar Creek wrote.

Nothing in the plans suggests that those trees would be removed.

The riverbank next to the Block One property is very steep, and has been reinforced with both large blocks of broken concrete and the roots of many large trees, the study said.

These trees are an important part of the structure of the riverbank, according to the study, which recommends that the developers attempt to maintain these trees to retain slope stability.

Other factors, such as night lighting and its impact on the river, also are addressed in the study.

Lights on the side of the proposed building facing the river should be shielded or directed to minimize the impact on the river, the report said.