

News Clips Report

Ex-hardware store eyed for a grocery Times-Picayune

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At long last, one of three large blighted and vacant commercial parcels in Mid-City appears poised to see some investment.

City Councilwoman Susan Guidry said her office has been told that the old Harry's Ace Hardware building at 301 N. Carrollton Ave. is under contract, and that Winn-Dixie is considering putting a new supermarket there. As it happens, the site is across the street from where a Winn-Dixie closed after Hurricane Katrina.

Neighborhood leaders are cautiously optimistic. Jennifer Farwell, president of the Mid-City Neighborhood Organization, said she has not officially polled group members, but she thinks it's a plus that the derelict property has apparently attracted an investor.

"We want to work with the new owners so that it's redeveloped in a fashion compatible with a history neighborhood and the needs of community," she said.

Guidry said her office had been contacted by **Townsend Underhill, a Stirling Properties agent**, about the project.

"The property is under contract now subject to some remediation that needs to be done," she said. "It has been a while since we have seen sketches,

but one version we were shown had parking on the ground level with the store above. We're also pleased that a Mid-City architect, Chip Verges, is working on the design and that they have agreed to go through design review."

Underhill said by e-mail this week that a confidentiality agreement with the tenant and landowner prohibits him from discussing the pending deal.

In addition to a Harry's Ace Hardware, a daiquiri shop and Chinese restaurant occupied the site prior to Katrina. The property has been a thorn in the neighborhood's side ever since. It is owned by the Berenson Family Fund and has been cited several times by the city for code violations.

Joe Laura, a Mid-City resident and former MCNO board member, is familiar with the problems at the property, especially the graffiti that he personally painted over before the owners offered to pay him for it.

Laura said that recent action from City Hall might have spurred the owners to sell. A few months ago, they were ordered to paint the building to eliminate several paint blotches that resulted from painting over the graffiti. Soon after that, Sewerage & Water Board workers appeared at the site and removed water meters to stem a leak that had left standing water and vegetation in the parking lot. Finally, three or four weeks ago, the owners were summoned to a code violation hearing and told to repair the building's roof, Laura said.

"If the city doesn't put pressure on some of these property owners so that they're facing fines and expenses, buildings like this one are going to sit blighted for years," Laura said.

'Upscale version' possible

On the neighborhood's website, some residents criticized the pre-hurricane Winn-Dixie store, located where Home Depot

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is now, and expressed concern about the prospect of a new one. But Farwell said it's likely the new store will bear little resemblance to its predecessor, in part because the former Harry's Ace building is about half the size of the original Winn-Dixie.

"We've heard unofficially that they're bringing in a new neighborhood market model and it's an upscale version of their traditional stores," Farwell said.

Winn-Dixie operates 484 stores and recently juggled its top management. The company implemented a "fresh and local" strategy in 2007 and has since remodeled 230 stores. In the coming year, the outfit plans to remodel 22 additional stores, some of which will incorporate the kind of specialty features locally available only at the company's Covington store.

The news was welcome, especially given that another big-ticket commercial redevelopment near the Harry's site appears to be on life support.

Green Coast Enterprises conceded last fall that their option to purchase the former Bohn Ford building at 401 N. Carrollton has not been renewed, jeopardizing the future of their ambitious Building Block project. Farwell said Green Coast had signed an option while it lined up financing for a sustainable industries center that would include offices, retail and a market.

"They had gotten an extension or two on their option before from the owner but when it came up for renewal last fall, Victory (Real Estate Investments) refused," she said. "Green Coast is looking at other options, but now with the Harry's Ace property going under contract, we hope they'll refocus on the Bohn Ford site."

Guidry said her office continues to work with Green Coast to find a solution.

Past target for retail

Victory Real Estate, based in Georgia, made a splash three years ago when the firm purchased and planned to develop a multiacre parcel of land in Mid-City stretching along Bienville Street from North Carrollton to North Jefferson Davis Parkway. After neighborhood leaders raised questions about the company's plans, the redevelopment stagnated.

Victory eventually put its New Orleans properties up for sale, and it succeeded in selling the former Lindy Boggs Medical Center to St. Margaret's Daughters in 2010. The purchasers plan to redevelop the medical complex into a nursing and specialty care facility. The only prominent Victory holdings remaining undeveloped are the Bohn Ford site and a three-block tract on Bienville Street adjacent to the future St. Margaret's facility.

Neither Victory Real Estate nor Green Coast Enterprises responded to requests for comments on the future of the Bohn Ford site.

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