

Royal Poinciana Plaza operators to float new proposal? Meetings involve Breakers, council

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The leadership of Royal Poinciana Plaza and The Breakers have quietly met with individual Town Council members in recent weeks to test the council's reaction to a possible future request to redevelop the aging plaza.

Lee Munder and his son, Adam, and Brian Kosoy of the Sterling Organization, which has leased the plaza from owner Sidney Spiegel, and Breakers President Paul Leone met with the individual council members, all of the council members and Leone said.

The plaza leaders appear to have taken a carrot-and-stick approach with the council.

On one hand, Leone hinted at a deal between the plaza and The Breakers in which the hotel would surrender some of its residential development rights on Royal Poinciana Way in exchange for council approval of condominium development at the plaza, Councilman Robert Wildrick said.

On the other hand, the plaza leaders hinted at the possibility of a partnership with Donald Trump, whose deep pockets, litigious habits and historically antagonistic relationship with the council could be a nightmare for the town if the billionaire developer were to come aboard.

Trump wouldn't comment for this story, but didn't deny having spoken with Munder and Kosoy, whom he described as friends.

"Trump's name was mentioned, as were others," Councilwoman Gail Coniglio said of her meeting.

"Munder never mentioned Donald Trump's name to me," Wildrick said. "He indicated there was another developer interested in developing the property, but he thought he [Munder] would be better to do it because he is a town resident and has the town's interest at heart. Lee Munder indicated the other developer was very litigious and not the kind of people Palm Beach would want to deal with."

Sterling didn't indicate when or if it might submit an application to redevelop the plaza, several council members said.

Such meetings, known as "ex parte," are perfectly legal and not uncommon. The council members said they attend such meetings to listen to what a prospective development applicant has to say.

Wildrick and Council President David Rosow were the only council members to describe their conversations with Leone and the plaza leaders. The other council members cited confidentiality and said little or nothing about the discussions.

Kosoy wouldn't comment for this story, and Lee Munder and Adam Munder didn't return phone messages seeking comment.

Leone, Kosoy and the Munders were concerned about the condition of the plaza and Royal Poinciana Way in general, Rosow said.

"They did not give me any plans for the plaza, anything to look at," Rosow said. "They talked about a variety of issues that affect them. The Breakers was at the table principally because they're concerned about Royal Poinciana Way."

Kleid and Coniglio said the meetings were exploratory and speculative in nature.

"They wanted some reaction to various ideas they had," Kleid said. "But there was no conversation about a specific proposal at any given time."

But Wildrick said Leone floated the idea of voluntarily reducing the number of homes it is allowed to build on the south side of Royal Poinciana Way, in what is known as The Breakers' PUD, or Planned Unit Development. The Breakers has longstanding approval from the town to build more than 200 units, but has said it has no immediate plans to do so.

"The Breakers said they may be willing to give up some of their [residential] density for this project, but hadn't made a final decision yet and were interested in what Town Council members thought," Wildrick said.

Sterling and the Munders have worked hard on the project and are passionate about it, Wildrick said.

"They indicated they were trying to decide if they should go forward or not, or turn their interest over to someone else," Wildrick said. "These are business people. There is only so much money and effort they're going to put into it."

In March, Sterling withdrew its hotly debated request for town permission to demolish the Royal Poinciana Playhouse and erect two five-story condominium buildings, a restaurant and a small park at the waterfront site. Sterling said the 52-year-old theater, dark since 2004, was not viable in today's market.

Rosow said a rumor has been floating for a while that the Munders might partner with Trump in some kind of development proposal for the plaza.

"That's a true concern," Rosow said. "We all have to bear in mind that that would be a totally different scenario if we have to work with Trump and his legions."

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