

Unicorp lands major project in Casselberry

BY JILL KRUEGER | STAFF WRITER

CASSELBERRY — The city of Casselberry — in a bold move to make over the heart of downtown — has hired Orlando-based Unicorp National Developments Inc. to develop the first phase of a planned, \$20 million mixed-use town center.

City officials say the project — called Casselberry City Center — is key to the community's revitalization efforts and ties into a larger effort to give new life to the entire U.S. Highway 17-92 corridor.

Orlando-based Unicorp, a retail developer that specializes in mixed-use, urban projects, has been involved in redevelopment initiatives involving Baldwin Park and Altamonte Town Center.

The developer was chosen for its "good track record and creative ideas," says Dick Wells, Casselberry's community development director. To jump-start the redevelopment, the city purchased 14.7 acres for \$3.25 million.

Unicorp co-owner Chuck Whittall says Phase 1 plans for the mixed-use development just north of State Road 436 at Triplet Lake Drive include:

- A 40,000-square-foot, two-story community center
- 74 two- to three-story upscale town homes
- 65,000 square feet of retail

The project also will feature neotraditional architecture, says Unicorp co-owner Lee Maher.

With the new community center, the city will expand its activities for children, adults and seniors, as well as provide meeting space, says Matthew Fortini, director of parks and recreation. Unicorp expects to break ground in a year, with project buildout in two years.

He says that the city will see how Unicorp does with the first phase and will consider Unicorp's suggestions for a second phase.

"We hope to be a participant and be active hand-in-hand with the city on their redevelopment," says Maher.

Town centers as a revitalization tool

The city of Casselberry sees the project as a revitalization tool.

Thus, the city plans to enhance what Unicorp is doing by extending Triplet Lake Drive west of U.S. 17-92 and build a large roundabout. It also will widen the road on the east side and add a twin roundabout.

Further, it will expand the existing Anniversary Park north of City Hall and tie it into the Unicorp project, Wells says.

Plans include an amphitheater with open seating, water features and green space.

"Our intent is to create an urban gathering place that we would use to host our special events," Fortini says.

The city also is making matching landscape and streetscape improvements on U.S. 17-92.

In addition, the local government is redesigning the front of City Hall and reor-

ganizing the interior to make it more customer-friendly, officials say.

"We anticipate the project will spark redevelopment throughout the city of Casselberry," says Tim Keen, director of development for Unicorp.

Other cities embrace mixed-use

Casselberry joins other cities in Central Florida that are embracing town centers. Experts say these governments see the projects as a way to bring life back to the heart of their cities and create a sense of place.

In particular, Orlando retail consultant David Marks points to the urban center initiatives in Lake Mary, Casselberry, Altamonte Springs, Sanford, Oviedo, Maitland, Winter Park and Orlando.

He believes the problem in downtown areas isn't a lack of retail but a lack of residents.

"Retail is about when and where the consumer wants it, but you have to have the consumer," Marks says.

That's why these projects, which have a strong residential component, have become so popular, he says.

He says what's most important about town centers is that they create community activities, which is what Casselberry is doing.

In fact, Marks believes town centers are the wave of the future for Florida. "We don't have the land to continue to develop at a low-urban density," he says.