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Koreshan group plans development at U.S. 41 and Corkscrew Road

Riverplace is a mixed-use endeavor centered around World College of Life and calls for 175,000 square feet of commercial uses, including a marina, residences and hotel rooms

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By CHARLIE WHITEHEAD, Staff Writer

It's not precisely what Cyrus Teed envisioned when he settled with his band of hollow-Earthers in Estero in the 1890s, but the heirs of the Koreshan legacy have development plans for the intersection of U.S. 41 and Corkscrew Road they think would make Teed proud.

The Koreshan Unity Foundation is a not-for-profit group dedicated to preserving the heritage of the original Koreshans. The Koreshans located in Estero around 1894, settling much of the area and laying claim to around 300 acres as far away as Fort Myers Beach. They were believers in "cellular cosmogony," Teed's theory was that the Earth was a hollow sphere with humans living on the inside of the sphere. Teed was known as "Koresh" to other commune members.

The modern-day group and its president, Charles Dauray, are announcing plans today for a project called Riverplace, a mixed-use endeavor centered around World College of Life, a symposium and retreat center, on four distinct parcels totaling 50 acres straddling the Estero River.

In addition to the center, the plans call for 175,000 square feet of commercial uses, including a low-intensity marina on the northern banks of the river, 165 residential units and 100 hotel rooms. Greg Stuart, the local professional planner who's spent more than a year fashioning the development plan, explained the residential and hotel units would actually be dormitory and transient-style lodgings for use by the retreats and symposiums expected to make use of the new facilities.

"It's a unique opportunity for the foundation and for Estero, and it dovetails nicely with the sector plan," Dauray said. "We have a good team, and we hope the community realizes what we want to accomplish."

The sector plan is the community plan Estero is putting together to add to Lee County's comprehensive plan.

Dauray met Thursday with community leaders to give them a sneak peek at the plans. The reaction seems positive, if guarded.

"If as the plan says it will be an honor to the Koreshans, then fine," said Arnold Rosenthal, a member of

Estero Civic Association and Estero Citizens Community Organization, who previewed the plans Thursday. "It would be welcome to the area. If it's a conference center, in the truest sense of the word, and they're careful who they bring in, then I think we ought to back it."

Rosenthal was cautious, however. He said the plans are "dressed up in nice raiment" but he wants to be sure what he saw on paper is what he eventually sees on the ground.

"If it's a sheep in sheep's clothing, it's wonderful," he said. "If it's a wolf in sheep's clothing, that's different."

Dauray said he spent the past 14 months buying what was at one time Koreshan land so he could develop it true to the original group's vision, and it won't stray.

"It could have had several different owners for separate pieces," he said. "That's rape it and scrape it and use it and abuse it. That's not my attitude."

In fact the plans call for keeping just over 45 percent of the site as open space, fully half of it in native plant species. Existing historic buildings and sites are to be restored and preserved, and a river buffer of from 125 to 140 feet will be established along 1,860 of the 2,000 feet of shoreline. The remainder will host a marina, restricted to canoes, kayaks and electric boats, and a riverfront restaurant.

The Koreshans own land on either side of longtime resident Ellen Peterson's home.

"Years ago I tried to talk Hedy into developing a pioneer village as a tourist attraction," Peterson said of Hedwig Michel, the last of the Koreshans, who died in 1982. "I think it would be a very good thing."

Peterson filed a legal challenge when Dauray's predecessor tried to build a bridge over the river in the late 1990s, but said if the current plans call for a footbridge she would have no objection.

Peterson said she could support the plans for a restaurant on the northern bank of the river, and said a little development would be OK if it resulted in preserving the rest of the river.

"It would be wonderful to have that part of the river protected," she said.


Jeanne Parks is manager of the Koreshan State Historic Site directly across U.S. 41. She said she's had a good working relationship with Dauray.


"We understand each other," she said. "He seems to be pretty open to a relationship with the park."


Parks said the plans to restore and remodel historic buildings sound good, as do plans to limit impact to the river and existing native species.

Larry Newell is past chairman of ECCO, and attended the sneak preview Thursday.

"I thought it to be a unique opportunity for the sector plan, which was started by ECCO," Newell said. "It could be the cornerstone of the community planning process."

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