
Industrial land awaits developers

By Sam Tranum
Staff Writer

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Boynton Beach * Boynton Beach has spent years holding certain pieces of land in reserve, waiting and hoping for industrial development while refusing to let residential builders move in.

Now, the city has a higher industrial vacancy rate than any of its neighboring communities. And 90 acres of industrial land remain undeveloped.

So the City Commission is considering relaxing the rules of its industrial land preservation program, and residential developers are planning to build 840 new apartments on industrial sites.

That's heartening for those who want to see the city's vacant industrial lands put to use. But others say it will change the character of the city for the worse.

"What I see in the future is we're going to be known as a drugstore and apartment building community," said City Commissioner Ron Weiland.

It has been more than a decade since the city made a rule that some of its land had to be set aside for warehouse and factory builders. City officials must get approval from state government to bypass that rule.

But last Tuesday, the City Commission, in a preliminary vote, backed the change 3-2. And this Tuesday, the city's Planning and Development Board on Tuesday will consider two developers' requests to build apartments on industrial land.

The new owners of the Motorola property near the corner of Gateway Boulevard and Congress Avenue want to erect 500 apartments and 63,500 square feet of commercial space. Another developer has plans for 340 apartments on a site east of Congress Avenue and south of Neptune Drive.

"We've opened the flood gates and any prime choice land that's industrial is going to be purchased," Weiland said, who voted against the proposal.

Boynton Beach has about 3.4 million square feet of industrial space already built, according to a report released this year by real estate market analyst ONCOR International. About 400,000 square feet, or 11 percent, of that space, is vacant, the report said.

That's about 10 times the vacancy rate of neighboring Lake Worth. And it's almost three times the vacancy rate of the county as a whole.

With that much existing space sitting empty, Boynton Beach planning staff are now saying city officials might have overestimated the future demand for industrial land as they made plans in the 1980s.

Mayor Gerald Broening is among those who want to let the City Commission decide on a case-by-case basis whether industrial land might better be put to other uses.

"We should let the market decide," Broening has said.

For Broening, the issue is more one of local control and private property rights than of development philosophy. Under the proposed change, instead of having to ask state officials for approval to build apartments on industrial land, officials could make the decision at City Hall.

"This allows the decision to be made at the local level, based on a specific analysis of a specific issue at the time," Broening said.

Sam Tranum can be reached at stranum@sun-sentinel.com or 561-243-6522.