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Shops, homes envisioned for Motorola site

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Boynton Beach's landmark Motorola building could be transformed into a hub of bustling shops and stylish residences if a local developer closes a deal on its sale.

Just south of the Congress Avenue plant, Boca Raton-based Compson Associates owns 28 acres where it plans to build 500 condominiums and townhouses, plus retail stores and two parking garages.

That project, Renaissance Commons, goes before the city commission Tuesday.

But Compson President Jim Comparato might not stop there. He said he wants to build a similar project at the 58-acre Motorola site, which his company has a contract to buy.

"It is certainly something I would like to explore the possibility of doing," he said.

If the deal goes through, it would mark the end of an era in Boynton Beach. Motorola has had a presence in the city for 20 years, designing and building pagers and other products.

At its peak in 1994 it employed 3,500 people, many of them highly paid engineers. But global competition forced Motorola to consolidate operations.

Last year, Motorola sold the sprawling complex -- nearly 600,000 square feet of virtually vacant office, warehouse and manufacturing space -- for \$22 million.

Most of the 400 workers who were there have moved to a building in Quantum Corporate Park, across Gateway Boulevard from the plant, but



Motorola has a lease on part of the building.

But nearly a year after the sale, the buyers -- a group including Capital Partners Inc. of Jacksonville and Maury L. Carter & Associates Inc. of Orlando -- have been unable to find tenants.

"We have people who have toured the property, but we haven't inked any deals," said Daryl Carter, president of Maury L. Carter & Associates.

Comparato isn't surprised.

"You don't have a lot of big office users and manufacturing users that are looking for space in today's economy," he said.

Comparato sees an opportunity to build a mixed-use project, a concept the city has embraced downtown with the proposed Marina Village and The Arches developments.

"Whatever plan we ultimately come up with is going to have to involve at least demolishing a portion of the building," Comparato said.

It's a plan that City Manager Kurt Bressner is open to, particularly since the empty building is not increasing the city's tax base.

"The redevelopment of the property potentially as mixed-use I think could be a positive," said Bressner, who added that he was pleased that Compson Associates has a contract on the facility.

"They've got a good track record," he said of the firm, which built Excelsior, a luxury condominium development in Boca Raton.

Bressner said much depends on whether the city commission approves Compson's Renaissance Commons project Tuesday.

That development would include 258 condominiums priced from \$150,000 to \$200,000 and 242 townhouses starting from the mid-\$200,000s.

It also would include 15,000 square feet of retail space, topped with townhouses, at the northwest corner of the property.

Compson bought the Renaissance Commons land for \$12.2 million and expects to move forward with the project immediately once it's approved, Comparato said. Construction could begin as early as January.

Meanwhile, movement on the Motorola building could be more complicated. Motorola has two years left on its lease.

The company is trying to sublease the 196,000 square-foot-space, spokeswoman Jennifer Weyrauch said.

Carter, of Maury L. Carter & Associates, said the lease hampers his group.

"Even if we wanted to tear down that building, Motorola is still a tenant in possession," he said.

He said his group has explored several options, including selling parcels to retailers separately.

"Because of the location of that property, it should include residential, professional and a big component of retail," he said.

If the building is ultimately torn down, a lot of people will be sad to see it go, including Diana Johnson, president of the Greater Boynton Beach Chamber of Commerce.

But, Johnson said, "Progress sometimes plows down landmarks and makes new ones. That land needs to be income-producing for the city."

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