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Open Realty Advisors plans a series of small retail and office buildings plus two parks and an underground garage along Henderson Avenue. (GFF)



By [Tristan Hallman](#)
8:00 AM on Dec 26, 2017

Two weeks before Christmas, Dallas developer Mark Masinter thought his years-long dream of a mixed-use makeover for North Henderson Avenue was coming to a swift end at the hands of Deputy Mayor Pro Tem Adam Medrano and some fierce East Dallas critics.

"I was getting the sense that unfortunately, it was going the wrong direction," Masinter said. "And I'm often accused of being too positive of a thinker."

Masinter's proposal, which requires approval for a significant zoning change, won a reprieve after Medrano and neighboring council member Philip Kingston moved to leave the project in limbo for another three months.



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Now, they'll try to find a solution — one that tones down Masinter's ambitions — in what has become a contentious and complicated zoning case.

"I've never lost sleep over a case," Medrano said during the meeting. "And this has done it."

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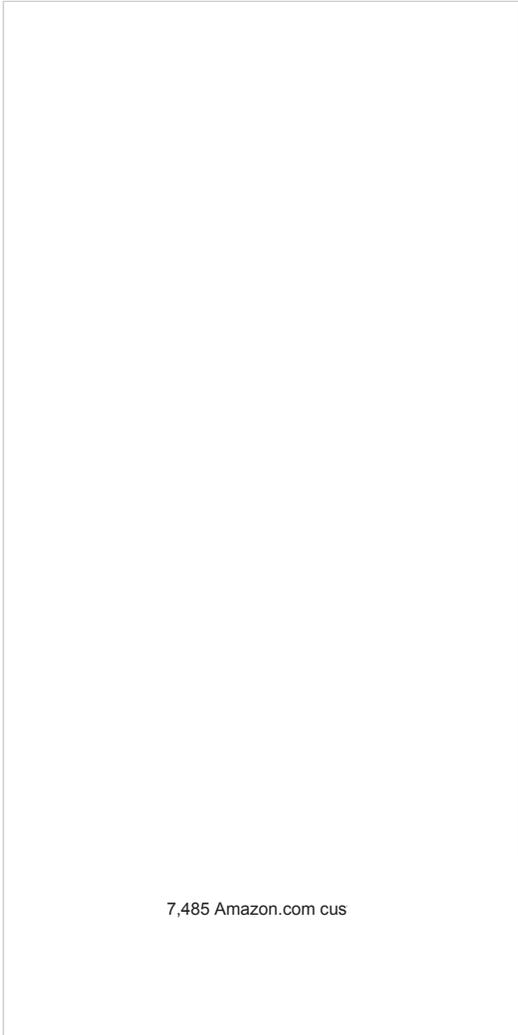
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Masinter's Open Realty Advisors and partners CIM Group have proposed building 100,000 square feet of office space, 82,100 square feet of retail space, some green space, some greenhouses and up to 12,000 square feet for restaurants on the site. The project would need 850 parking spaces — 754 of which would be in an underground parking lot.



Founder of Open Realty Advisors & Open Hospitality Partners Mark Masinter. (Randy Shropshire / Getty Images for GLG)

The rezoning would represent a major course change for the trendy block that is still a little rough around the edges. The current zoning doesn't allow for his plans.

Currently, the lots between Glencoe Street and McMillan Avenue are mostly vacant, a relative blight to an otherwise bustling corridor. The sidewalks there are a shambles, and the street is awaiting the use of 2012 bond

dollars that will help make it more pedestrian-friendly and add a turn lane.

The site appears primed for some type of development. Down the street toward Central Expressway are businesses such as Henderson Tap House and acclaimed restaurant Gemma. The other way, passers-by see businesses such as Sprouts, Houndstooth coffee, clothing store Kit and Ace, and hip eyewear retailer Warby Parker.

Bars and apartment complexes — things Masinter says he doesn't want to build — also line Henderson.

Masinter, who has also played a significant role on Knox Street, sees major potential in the area. He said he bought the property so he could continue to shape the corridor.

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"Honestly, Knox-Henderson has the potential to be one of the greatest districts not only in this region, but anywhere in the country," he said. "The trajectory of Knox-Henderson is just fantastic."

Masinter seems to say the right things politically to win support on such a zoning case. He talks about being responsible with the corridor. He got a letter of support from Christopher Leinberger, a prominent urbanist expert at George Washington University. He said he's sensitive to the philosophy of neighborhood self-determination. He said the project has changed as he sought input from neighbors, an effort he dubbed his own personal "New Hampshire primary."

He also likes to point out that he has proposed building less density than the zoning currently allows. Masinter said he's warned opponents that they could get stuck with what they're zoned for: "more stick-built apartments and bars."

"I said, 'I can't believe that's what you want more of in this neighborhood,'" he said.

Masinter officially had the overwhelming support of the majority of neighbors who responded in the city's notification area. The City Plan Commission gave its thumbs-up to the project in June. And some City Council members who looked at the project said they would like to have something like it in their own districts.

But critics said the support was overstated by properties owned by LLCs and Masinter's associates in the area, although Masinter counters that some of the fiercest critics don't live next to the project.

Still, the critics' objections struck a nerve with Medrano and Kingston. Preservationist Virginia McAlester, for instance, said the development was too intense, too large and would resemble the commercial use of Knox Street. She said too much traffic would follow — the traffic analysis said it could result in hundreds more daily trips than existing zoning — and the project would overwhelm the block, currently two lanes.

"It's grossly over-scaled," she said.

Kingston said he likes Masinter but believes the developer overstates how much he has changed the project after neighborhood input.

"'Tweak' is a generous way to put them," Kingston said of the changes.

The project is huge and the parking is monstrous, Kingston said. And while Kingston believes more office space is probably needed in Dallas, he said the area's two-decade-old zoning plan is generally good.

"The only reason we would want to change it ... is the idea that there could be something better," Kingston told council colleagues in the meeting. "That is an idea that intrigues me and Mr. Medrano."

Kingston said the two sides can probably get "a little closer to something that looks like what everyone wants."

For now, the two sides are taking a breather over the holidays. But when they come back to the table early next year, Kingston said, he believes Masinter is willing to make substantive concessions. Masinter is likewise optimistic that some kind of deal can be reached.

"I've got to believe somewhere in all of this is room for compromise," Masinter said. "Otherwise, we're just wasting three months."



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