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OUR TOWN

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Vision of future wows crowd

Developer shares 'shopping experience' plans for The Loop

By BOB FLISS

CHARLOTTE BUSINESS EDITOR
PUNTA GORDA — All Boston-based developer Tom Wilder had to do was say "1.2 million square feet" in a perfectly matter-of-fact tone.

Those words drew an audible gasp from a crowd of more than 300 who turned out Thursday night to hear about his plans for The Loop, a massive shopping

center on Jones Loop Road south of Punta Gorda. Even standing room was at a premium at the Punta Gorda Isles Civic Association, as Team Punta Gorda held its third annual meeting, with Wilder as keynote speaker.

Wilder — a soft-spoken man not given to overstatement — drew spontaneous applause when he observed that The Loop would help stop the flight of local retail

dollars to shopping destinations outside Charlotte County.

By way of illustration, Wilder displayed a map identifying 13 major retail properties in Charlotte, Lee, Sarasota, and Manatee counties. Aside from Murdock's Port Charlotte Town Center, all are a good 20 miles or more from the future site of The Loop.

And while there may be retailing in North Port and North Fort

Myers, the real "destination" centers are in northern Sarasota County, like the small but upscale St. Armands Circle, or in Lee County south of the Caloosahatchee River, like the Edison Mall and the Bell Tower Shops.

In between, there's this rather substantial area that's hurrying for a big center that offers not just

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shopping but a "shopping experience," Wilder said.

"This is not a regional mall," Wilder said. These enclosed centers are a thing of the past, largely because there are more attractive open-air designs that give shoppers the option of parking close to their destinations or staying and strolling. The Loop will be designed to keep both these groups happy.

Along with a retail lineup of probably three big department stores, there will be several "junior anchors" like large sporting goods shops or bookstores. There will also be space for small retailers and as many as seven restaurants.

The 1.2 million square feet of retail doesn't count other plans Wilder has for his 200-acre tract. There will be a hotel with about 200 rooms — or perhaps two smaller hotels with about 200 rooms between them. Also, count in about 100,000 square feet of office space — some of which will be above the retail shops, in the manner of early 20th century downtowns.

Wilder's visit provided an upbeat finale to TPG's annual meeting, which otherwise was highlighted by the announcement that Judy Brentano would step

down as chief executive officer at the end of this year. Taking over will be Nancy Prafke, who has logged many hours as a TPG volunteer, and currently leads its operations and administration team.

A volunteer organization formed shortly after Hurricane Charley in 2004 to mobilize grassroots support from civic improvements, TPG has usually been able to draw a healthy crowd for whatever cause it's supporting.

Thursday may have been a new high. So far, the only visible evidence of Wilder's interest in the area has been news stories and several signs posted on Jones Loop announcing the new center.

However, Wilder noted that a great deal has been accomplished to clear the design of The Loop with Charlotte County planners. As the project is large enough to rank as a "development of regional impact," it will also have to be cleared by the state Department of Community Affairs in Tallahassee. After that, final approval will rest with the Charlotte County Commission.

Meeting all the regulatory requirements has been a little more challenging than originally projected, Wilder said in an interview prior to last night's presentation. But

his goal of an early 2009 opening is still achievable.

"You want to be open before the middle of the year, because the retailers need time to do their uplift, while opening in time for the Christmas season," Wilder said.

In its current corporate form, The Wilder Companies owns and manages about 50 retail centers with about 20 million square feet of space. They range from regional malls to specialty centers.

Of all its current projects, the one most like The Loop is a namesake project outside Orlando opened in 2005. It leaped up so quickly that a second phase, Loop West, opened this year, anchored by a J.C. Penney department store. The two adjacent centers are about 840,000 square feet.

The tenant list of Wilder properties is like a Who's Who of big American retailers. They include Belk, Old Navy, Sports Authority, Bed Bath & Beyond, Borders, along with a host of smaller retailers and restaurants.

Many of these retailers will be coming to Punta Gorda. Negotiations being negotiations, Wilder doesn't have any names to announce.

Yet, "It hasn't been that hard a

story to tell. These retailers get it. They understand that this is the place to be," Wilder said. "We have a clear slate to do something unique and innovative and that will be a regional draw."

Many residents have wondered whether The Loop is for real — much as they earlier wondered whether the Charlotte County Airport would ever get scheduled airline service.

Columbus, Ohio-based Skybus Airlines removed any doubt when its president, Ken Gile, announced plans for daily flights at a Sept. 20 conference at the airport's new terminal building.

Thursday marked Wilder's public debut as a player in economic development — although he has been active behind the scenes for many months.

Wilder noted some parallels between his deal and Skybus' new service. "Historically, if you look at how Florida has grown, it has grown up around the airports," he said.

Wilder added that he's looking forward to someday taking his business flights direct to Punta Gorda via Skybus' new daily service to Portsmouth, N.H., which will start in December. Portsmouth is about an hour from Boston.