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Stockbridge land seizure panel assailed

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A member of the Stockbridge Urban Redevelopment Agency and his family own millions of dollars' worth of property on the block adjacent to land the agency plans to purchase or condemn and sell to private developers.

The five-member agency was created this summer by the city to oversee Stockbridge's plans to acquire and redevelop land into a new, smart-growth downtown filled with shops, offices and new high-density homes. When the new town center rises, nearby property values could rise significantly, a city consultant believes.

Some residents think redevelopment agency member Vernon Moss' land holdings put him in conflict with his duties as a member of the condemning agency.

Barbara Torbett doesn't own land downtown, but the idea of forcibly taking others' property to sell to developers angers her. And she's dismayed that a member of the agency seizing the property could profit from the redevelopment. "Certainly a person who serves on this [agency] should be persons not connected to real estate and who stand to gain from Stockbridge redoing the downtown," she said.

Three lots down from the property to be redeveloped is Moss Properties' 4-acre Bridge Village strip shopping center, which includes a paint store, a beauty shop and classroom space for a private school. Moss Properties is a limited liability corporation whose managers include Vernon Moss and his wife, Deanna, and sons Vernon Jr. and Roger Moss.

The company developed the center nine years ago. County land records value it at \$1.8 million, but the corporation had it up for sale in July for \$4.2 million. It did not sell and is no longer on the market. Moss Properties also owns an adjacent undeveloped 17 acres, which the county values at \$994,500.

Moss could not be reached for comment and is ill, family members said.

His son Roger Moss said, "I personally don't see a conflict of interest with my corporation and property we own and the city of Stockbridge."

'Of outstanding character'

Jim Butcher, chairman of the redevelopment agency, defended Moss' appointment to the agency. "He is of outstanding character," Butcher said. He noted that Moss had helped found the local Little League with money

out of his own pocket.

"He is not someone out to screw people," Butcher said.

Stockbridge has been planning for redevelopment since 2000.

The Sizemore Group, a land use and planning consultant, helped identify more than 120 acres of the old town core for revitalization, and the City Council approved a zoning overlay district there to help turn Stockbridge into a lively mixed-use community. The district sets architectural guidelines and controls the kind and size of businesses that can locate in town. The Atlanta Regional Commission gave the city \$2.9 million in grants for planning, streetscaping, sidewalks and road improvements in the district and other parts of town.

The Sizemore Group and the City Council also identified 24 acres in the overlay district to jump-start the development in 2004. The city declared the area of older homes, small businesses and empty lots a slum area so it could buy or condemn the land. The Mosses' property, while not inside the downtown redevelopment area, is inside the overlay district.

Mike Sizemore of the Sizemore Group told agency members in June that Smyrna had done such a redevelopment and "values have gone up considerably and he [Sizemore] felt the City of Stockbridge could do the same," according to minutes of the meeting.

Moss was appointed to the redevelopment agency in August after another member stepped down, but he had publicly backed the downtown redevelopment plan earlier. He spoke in a City Council meeting April 11 on behalf of a group of downtown property owners and citizens supporting the redevelopment.

"Spoke person [sic] Vernon Moss for the support group stated that he does not own any land in the area that is being proposed. This group feels very firmly about this project . . . they want to see something done. . . . If the city is going to do something with this project, let's get it done," city minutes paraphrase Moss.

A month later, he bought the 17 acres adjoining his center. The property is being graded.

Moss was serving at the time on the city of Stockbridge Downtown Development Authority, another city-appointed agency. He resigned from that authority when he took his new position.

A 'dog in this fight'?

Mark Meeks, whose Stockbridge Florist and Gifts has been condemned, said, "Before [Moss] was appointed to the agency, he stood up in a city meeting and said, 'I don't have a dog in this fight.' I was there that night."

Meeks believes Moss' nearby holdings are a dog in the fight.

Roger Moss said he couldn't answer for his father on the question of whether Vernon Moss' new duties present a conflict of interest, but that he didn't see one. "[The 17 acres] was purchased before Dad became a part of that committee and after the land plan had been done," he said.

"We just felt like it was a wise investment, and it just so happens that some progress is taking place around it. I don't see any wrongdoing."

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