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Allen House to be replaced by mixed-use project

REAL ESTATE

Allen House, long a local residential icon, will soon be gone, replaced by a mixed-use project of housing, offices and retail

From the ground up

By **David Kaplan and Nancy Sarnoff** Published 6:30 am, Wednesday, January 24, 2007



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The 896-unit complex is nearly full of tenants.

ALONG scenic Allen Parkway and five minutes from downtown, the **Allen House Apartments** are a local institution, a place college students, seniors, actors and journalists have called home.

The owners of the property want to make it a different kind of local landmark.

On Tuesday, residents there were told that the Boston-based real estate firm that has owned the complex for two decades plans to turn the 24 acres of

prime land into Regent Square, a mixed-use urban village housing apartments, condominiums, shops and a boutique hotel.

For Houston, known for its suburban sprawl, Regent Square will be something different: an open, walkable neighborhood for living, working, shopping and dining.

The developer, **GID Urban Development Group**, a division of the **General Investment** and Development Cos., has hired seven architecture firms to design the project.

GID owns 12,000 apartment units nationally.

The first phase, scheduled to start construction in September and to be completed in 2010, will offer 740 apartment units, 230,000 square feet of retail, 60,000 square feet of office space and a hotel on two city blocks.

A future phase of the project GID hopes to complete by 2014 could have 1,000 more residential units, including three condominium towers, more apartments and another 100,000 square feet of retail space.

Other plans rumored

It's not the only major mixed-use project being proposed locally. Wulfe & Co. already announced its plans for a 21-acre BLVD Place near the Galleria, and others are rumored to be in the works.

Even among such projects, however, Regent Square may be unique. Most local mixed-use proposals are to be on massive square-block sites, whereas Regent Square is on an irregularly shaped property that aims to blend into the fabric of the surrounding neighborhood.

John Darrah, vice president, GID Urban Development Group, said he hopes to create a "symbiotic relationship" with nearby **River Oaks Shopping Center** to encourage shoppers to visit both districts on the same trip.

Regent Square will be bordered on the north by Allen Parkway, south by West

Clay, east by Dunlavy and west by Tirrell.

Darrah would not disclose the project's cost.

Conventional wisdom

A mixed-use project like Regent Square goes against the conventional wisdom of Houston developers, said **Michael Swartz**, a project manager at **David M. Schwarz/Architectural Services**, the Washington, D.C., firm that is doing the master plan.

"In Houston, there's a mind-set of: You make your return on investment in three years," but with Regent Square, Swartz said, "you have an owner who's committed to a project for a very long term. They've owned the property for 20 years and expect to keep it for 20 years or more."

"An early exit strategy wouldn't work with a project like this."

Schwarz has designed other mixed-use projects in Texas. They include West Village in Dallas, Southlake Town Square outside Fort Worth and Amerquest Field/Ballpark in Arlington.

Houston-based **Morris Architects** is the project's executive architect. It will oversee the design and construction of the project in collaboration with design firms, including Schwarz, **Robert A.M. Stern Architects**, Aponwao Design in Miami and B&D Studio in Parma, Italy.

In the first phase, most of the buildings will be traditionally styled, between four and eight stories, while a few prominently featured structures will be contemporary.

Urban mixed-use projects reflect a national trend and are increasingly popular among empty nesters and young professionals, particularly those who are tired of long automobile commutes, said **Michael Beyard**, a senior fellow at the **Urban Land Institute**.

Regent Square's location "couldn't be much better" for an urban-style mixed-use project, said **Kent Dussair**, president of **CDS Market Research**, a Houston-based professional consulting firm. "Allen Parkway is one of Houston's gems."

Right circumstances

Many people want to live near downtown, given the right circumstances and environment and residential unit price, he said.

"I think it will be very exciting for the northern end of Montrose. The design, from what I saw, is really very exciting," said **Sue Lovell**, at-large city council member.

The city will likely have to grant variances for the project, she said. It will look at potential negative effects from the new development, such as more traffic congestion.

"The beauty of their project is there's a lot of entrances and exits, as opposed to other projects in Montrose sending lots of traffic out one way into very busy streets," she said.

New streets will be constructed on the site: a main north-south thoroughfare and another going east-west, parallel to and south of Dallas.

About 30 percent of Regent Square will be devoted to public space, such as wide sidewalks and a public square.

There will be underground, street level and above-ground parking.

The 896 units in the Allen House complex are nearly full.

Christine Covelli, who rents a one-bedroom apartment at Allen House, said she'd live there forever if she could.

"At least now it's moderately priced," she said.

Allen House, which was built in the 1960s, has been a close-knit community, she said. The six-year resident often barbecues in the courtyards with other tenants.

Notices of the impending apartment demolition were sent Tuesday to the 600 residents in the part of the complex that will be developed first.

They will not have to move out until June, Darrah said, and longer-term residents will receive various move-out benefits, relocation help and discounts on rent if they choose to move into Regent Square.

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