

28-story office tower proposed for SoBro

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An Atlanta developer is considering a 28-story tower just south of the Shelby Avenue pedestrian bridge, a building that could become the headquarters for one of the state's biggest law firms.

Representatives for Barry Real Estate Cos. have met with Metro officials and civic designers to discuss a 417-foot office tower between the bridge, Demonbreun Street and Second and Third avenues. The building would serve as the headquarters for Nashville-based Bass, Berry & Sims, replacing its offices in the AmSouth Center on Deaderick Street.

The building would be the tallest south of Broadway, rising higher than the Hilton Nashville Downtown and the proposed Westin hotel. It would also be taller than the proposed 20-story Encore residential project and the Nashville Sounds-proposed condo buildings, one of which could rise 20 stories at the base of the Gateway Bridge.

The office tower would reach nearly 200 feet higher than city zoning rules permit south of Broadway, but Barry plans to request a zoning change, an official said.

But one major party to the deliberations, Bass Berry managing partner Keith Simmons, said no final decision has been made about the project. Bass Berry representatives have participated in only a few meetings with city officials and have not committed to moving, he said.

"We're very interested in that property, and we'd like to be able to make it work," Simmons said. "But it is still all fairly preliminary."

Jimmy Barry, an executive for Barry Real Estate, would not comment.

If the discussions break down, Bass Berry has at least two other options for office space.

The firm has discussed moving into an office tower that local developer Alex Palmer plans near the meeting of West End Avenue and Broadway. The firm could also remain in its 120,000-square-foot offices in AmSouth Center after its lease expires in 2009.

"I don't know that anything is off the table at this point," Simmons said. "There are questions that have to be answered about what we can build and what we can afford to build. We've looked at that property, but none of these questions have been answered at this particular point."

Barry's plans have not yet been filed with the city, and representatives have discussed the proposal with only a few key officials whose approval is essential to the project.

Their presentations show an office tower with six levels of parking, two of them underground. The garage would be topped with 22 floors of offices, enough room to accommodate Bass Berry and at least one other major tenant.

The building would stand on land owned by the family of parking magnate Monroe Carell Jr. and leased to Carell's company, Central Parking Corp. The lot is a block east of the Sounds downtown baseball stadium site and less than a block from the Westin and Encore sites.

The building would exceed new height guidelines for the "south of Broadway" district, known as SoBro. Those cap buildings at 220 feet. That's about 20 stories for a residential building.

Because they have higher ceilings, office projects generally are able to fit fewer stories within the cap.

Metro Councilman Mike Jameson, who has seen drawings and a wooden model of the SoBro office building, said Barry representatives told him the company would seek a special zoning change to permit the project.

"I told them that right now I have no objections, but I have to do my homework. There may be some extremely reasonable, legitimate reasons for it (the 220-foot cap)."

City officials have already forced another developer, Tony Giarratana, to revise a SoBro project to meet the new rules. He removed two stories from his Encore condo building on Third Avenue to bring it under the cap. A groundbreaking ceremony for that building is scheduled next week.

Arkansas-based developer The Barber Group has drawn fire for its plans for a 19-story Westin one block north of the site Barry is discussing. Opponents fear that building would destroy Lower Broadway's standing as a historic district.

Less detailed discussions have also been held with Rick Bernhardt, the city's planning director. He doubted that a formal proposal is close to being submitted.

"We told them that we're glad to have them in the area, but whatever they build out there has to comply with the guidelines. I think it's a fishing expedition. I don't think it makes any difference with the building what it looks like at this point."

But Tom Turner, executive director of the Nashville Downtown Partnership, said the scope of Barry's presentations suggest the firm is serious about building an office tower. He had not seen a model or detailed drawings, but said they are often costly to produce. •