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Law firm unveils plan for SoBro office tower

But Bass, Berry & Sims faces zoning hurdle

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Bass, Berry & Sims is moving on up to an office building in the sky — a 28-story tower that would loom over the developing SoBro district.

There's one hitch, though. The Atlanta developer backing the project needs a special zoning change to bypass a height restriction that has resulted in the scaling back of a nearby condo project.

The law firm and its 160 lawyers would leave eight floors and 130,000 square feet of space empty in downtown's AmSouth Center on Deaderick Street. Their new digs would be a nearly \$110 million building next to the Schermerhorn Symphony Center.

"One of our real goals here is to stay downtown," said Keith Simmons, managing partner of Bass, Berry & Sims. "We truly believe a strong city needs a vibrant, healthy downtown."

He said the growing law firm wanted more space in a new building with enough parking for all his employees. The AmSouth building is more than 30 years old and doesn't have enough parking for everyone, Simmons said.

Hal Barry, chairman of Atlanta-based developer Barry Real Estate Companies, said his firm wants to be "part of the skyline of Nashville."

"The real story for me is all cities have seen flight to places like CoolSprings and Brentwood, and a lot of corporate growth has left the city," Barry said. The new building, designed by Pickard Chilton of Connecticut and Everton Oglesby Architects in Nashville, would be built on what is now a parking lot between Second and Third avenues. The goal is to finish construction by late 2009.

Made of glass and limestone or granite, the building would have an eco-friendly design and a "green roof" of vegetation that would soak up rainfall and keep the building cool.

No other tenants besides Bass, Berry & Sims have been named.

Brian Schiedemeyer, asset manager for the AmSouth Center, didn't want to speculate on prospects for filling the space that would be left if Bass, Berry & Sims moves out. The law firm takes 22 percent of the building and is the No. 2 tenant behind AmSouth, a bank that is being acquired by Alabama-based Regions Bank.

Some observers are worried that allowing taller buildings to go up south of Broadway could hurt the core of downtown. "I think it's important the city recognizes the central business district that exists and ought to be preserved," Schiedemeyer said.

Others consider the Bass, Berry building a bold step.

"It's a bold step in terms of it being (in) a new area," said Mark Woolwine, a senior



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Rendering of proposed
Third Ave. S. (COURT
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associate with CB Richard Ellis real estate. "It makes complete sense in terms of the availability of land. There is no question that the south side (of Broadway) is more affordable and flexible."

The Bass, Berry building would be the tallest in SoBro, but not the tallest in Nashville.

Tony Giarratana plans to develop a 65-story hotel and condo project at Fifth Avenue and Church Street dubbed Signature Tower. Across Broadway, though, he faced a height restriction of 220 feet on another project, which led to him to scale back his Encore condos to meet the rules.

The Barry family suggested that this latest development would not get done if it can't get a height exemption to the zoning law, both because that's what the law firm wants and because the economics of the deal work better that way.

The council member who represents SoBro, Mike Jameson, said he would favor allowing the building to rise to a planned 380 feet, if the builders agree to get the project LEED-certified (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), a strict standard for environmentally friendly buildings.

Because building plans were turned in Thursday to the Metro Planning Commission, a deadline was met to get on the agenda for a Metro Council meeting Nov. 9.

The Planning Commission will meet on it Sept. 14. •