

## Vista Point negotiations heat up

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson  
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LAKEPORT — The competition for control of the Vista Point Shopping Center took a turn toward the contentious Tuesday, with the current leaseholders and the man negotiating to purchase the land from the city taking their cases to the council.

On Tuesday afternoon, Jeff Walters of Meridian Investments sent the Lakeport City Council a letter asking that the council reconsider Meridian's bid to purchase the land underneath the Vista Point Shopping Center, located on Lakeport Boulevard.

Meridian currently holds the lease on the shopping center buildings, with the city offering the land itself for sale.

In August the city entered negotiations with Matt Riveras, 43, of Windsor, who also owns a home in Lakeport and whose father-in-law is Councilman Buzz Bruns. Bruns was absent from Tuesday's council meeting.

Walters, who was at home on the East Coast and did not attend the council meeting, told Lake County News Tuesday afternoon that City Attorney Steve Brookes invited Meridian to submit a bid for the property on Sept. 10, and Meridian — with its partner Presidio Development Partners LLC — entered a \$1.1 million bid that same day. Brookes confirmed that information with Lake County News.

The bid the city accepted from Riveras was for \$1,001,000.

The letter to the council asked them to drop negotiations with Riveras and accept Meridian and Presidio's offer — which they raised to \$1.2 million.

Walters said Riveras was stalling the sale, while Meridian and Presidio were ready to move forward immediately on a project that he said would benefit the city.

Lakeport attorney Barry Parkinson, representing Meridian, told the council Tuesday that Meridian and Presidio are attempting to negotiate with Riveras, who they would have to deal with if the purchase went through.

Parkinson said the negotiations are not going well and that they are concerned Riveras is going to resort to a "legal process" rather than negotiations.

Easton McAllister of Presidio Development told the council that Meridian and Presidio were prepared to enter a purchase agreement for the shopping center to close in 21 days. McAllister also offered the new \$1.2 million bid. "We have a lot of interest in developing this property," he said.

McAllister repeated statements from Walters' letter, which mentioned possible tax revenues for the city of \$500,000 a year with a new development.

He went on to suggest that total construction costs could go as high as \$50 million, an amount Presidio has the backing to finance.

McAllister asked the council to discontinue negotiations with Riveras and consider the Meridian/Presidio offer.

### RIVERAS RAISES HIS OWN CONCERNS

During his presentation, Riveras said he felt the need to defend himself against misstatements by Meridian and Presidio's representatives, some of which were based on confidential conversations he had with Walters and Mark Conroe of Meridian.

"Those comments have been taken out of context," said Riveras, including one sarcastic comment he said he had made about intending to sit on the property for 21 years until Meridian's lease expired.

"Where were these guys three years ago, a year ago or when the council put this out to bid?" Riveras asked.

Riveras said he intends to develop the property. He added that he believes Meridian and Presidio are using an unrealistic figure of \$50 million in development costs in order to make his development plans look small.

He said he has no intention of letting the property negotiations fall into a legal battle, and said he has had "cordial" conversations with Walters and believes he can reach an agreement with both Meridian and Presidio.

Riveras also handed to Brookes a ratified addendum to his contract with the city that he said "is a bit concerning for me."

"That's because he is attempting to do a phase one environmental study — which looks at historical uses and conditions of a property — as part of his due diligence. To complete the study he and his consultants need access to the property, which he said Meridian denied.

"It is my hunch and suspicion that we were delayed so that Meridian or Presidio or a third entity that they're putting together to acquire the land would have a chance," said Riveras.

He told the council that it's a reasonable expectation that he should be granted access to the buildings, although he technically is only buying the land underneath.

In order to gain access and complete the study, he asked for a two-week extension on closing escrow, adding that he is prepared to still close by Oct. 26.

Brookes said it was his understanding that the property manager had been on vacation, which was the reason for the delay.

Riveras countered that there was no effort by Meridian to contact the shopping center's five tenants to give him access.

Councilman Ron Bertsch questioned Riveras' desire to the study, saying it was his understanding this was an "as is" sale.

He asked if Riveras could finish by Oct. 26.

Riveras said his original contract granted him 45 days for due diligence, with the second contract allowing him 14 days. That second contract was ratified Sept. 25, at which time he ordered the environmental study.

He said he entered the negotiations in good faith and deposited his check. Now, Riveras said, he would like to have that study. "I've been moving this forward as any savvy investor would."

#### SUPPORTERS TURN OUT FOR RIVERAS

Riveras got a little help from several well-known friends, who spoke to the council in support of him.

Bill Brunetti, owner of the Bruno's Shopping Center, said he has known Riveras for a long time and said he can follow through on his plans for the center.

"I think he's dealt in very good faith so far, and he will in the future, because he's a good person," said Brunetti.

After many years of watching the shopping center fall apart, Brunetti said it's amusing to now see a flurry of activity, with people suddenly willing to throw money at the center.

He said the city should be embarrassed about the center's condition, and should have acted a long time ago to end Meridian's lease. Brunetti asked the council to give Riveras the extra time he requested which, he said, after so many years shouldn't matter.

Real estate developer Joe SanFilippo and Nancy Ruzicka also encouraged the city to give Riveras extra time.

McAllister returned to the podium to address Riveras's contention that Meridian and Presido were denying Riveras access.

He said he understood that Riveras had been granted access to the buildings on Oct. 18, which Brookes said was his understanding as well.

McAllister, however, questioned why Riveras had waited so long to ask for the phase one study, which he said is usually done immediately and could have been started not long after the city approved Riveras's purchase proposal on Aug. 7.

Former Councilman Ted Mandrones said he knows firsthand the issues the city has had with Vista Point. He said he knows Riveras personally and professionally, and appealed to the council to give Riveras a chance to put together his project.

The council adjourned into closed session after the regular meeting to discuss the sale negotiations.

Brookes told Lake County News later in the evening that the council decided in closed session to not give Riveras a time extension. The current purchase agreement calls for escrow to end on or before Oct. 26.

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