

# Politics figure in Oxford land development battles

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The Oxford Development Co. has won one battle, but it may soon find itself fighting a two-front war.

The Monroeville-based firm was recently awarded the right to negotiate a sales agreement with Allegheny County to develop the proposed \$100 million Grant Street skyscraper complex in downtown Pittsburgh — a keystone project in the city's Renaissance II program.

## Analysis

Oxford got the nod on a controversial 2-1 vote by Allegheny County commissioners over the competing Grant Land Co. Grant Land, a subsidiary of the Hillman Co., has vowed to fight the decision in court — a move that could tie up the project for months.

It is not the only court hassle facing Oxford. Oxford also is the developer of the proposed Ferguson Mall on N. Atherton Street in Ferguson Township. Citizens' groups opposed to the construction of the mall on the 150-acre Dreibelbis farm tract have successfully received a preliminary injunction to halt a zoning change Oxford needs to construct the mall. The injunction by Judge Richard M. Sharp forbids the Ferguson Township supervisors from acting on Oxford's request to rezone 100 acres of the farm from residential to commercial

until the citizens' groups have their say at a public hearing Tuesday.

Oxford now finds itself in the unenviable position of fighting a two-front war in the courts to get their proposed projects off the drawing boards and under construction.

The decision by the Allegheny County commissioners to award the Grant Street project to Oxford is highly political in nature. The two commissioners voting in favor of Oxford — Jim Flaherty and Tom Foerster — are Democrats. Curiously enough, Edward Lewis, owner of Oxford development, was a chief contributor to the unsuccessful gubernatorial campaign of Jim's brother Pete Flaherty.

Voting against Oxford and in favor of Hillman's Grant Land was Commissioner Robert Peirce. Although Peirce claims he voted against Oxford because Grant Land has offered more money for the 1.8 acres of prime real estate in the city, there could be and undoubtedly is another motive for his vote.

Peirce is the lone Republican commissioner. The Hillman Co. is owned by the husband of Elsie Hillman, a national GOP committeewoman and Peirce's political patron.

When all things are considered, it becomes quite obvious the decision to give the Grant Street project to Oxford was political. The Allegheny County Planning Commission reviewed volumes of information on both firms' proposals and decided the Grant project was the better — both financially and in overall



The Dreibelbis farm, located off N. Atherton Street (Route 322) in Ferguson Township, is the site for Oxford Development's proposed \$10-\$12 million Ferguson Mall. A group of Ferguson Township residents has opposed attempts by Oxford to get almost 100 acres of the farm re-

zoned from residential to commercial so construction can begin. Shown here are part of the 23 acres of the former dairy outlet that are already zoned commercial. The Nittany Mountains are in the background.

Photo by Phil Norton

construction.

Oxford is worth about \$65 million. The Hillman Co. is valued at almost \$110 million. Hillman has a definite tenant for occupying at least half of one of the two towers. Allegheny Ludlum Industries has said they would rent space in one of

the towers if the project had been awarded to Grant Land. Oxford has no such commitment for tenants and their competitor is willing to up the sale price for the land.

Meanwhile, in Centre County, Oxford's mall has become the target of

wrath from many Ferguson Township residents. Most Ferguson residents aren't actually opposed to the mall's construction — in fact, they favor development in their community. Their biggest complaint is the location of the mall.

Oxford's proposal to locate the mall along heavily-traveled N. Atherton Street (Route 322), near a large residential area and adjacent to an elementary school, just doesn't sit well with property owners in the area. Fearing a drop in their property values and a traffic mess rivaling a 1:25 p.m. arrival to a Penn State home football game, the residents of Park Hills and other surrounding housing plans have taken up arms against Oxford.

A group of them has even formed an organization to collect funds for legal battles against Oxford and to work for responsible development in the community. Known as ACORD (A Community Organization for Responsible Development), they've collected numerous signatures on petitions for presentation to Ferguson supervisors at Tuesday's meeting.

How Oxford will fare in the local battle remains to be seen. The possibility of another lengthy court battle to gain land for development could leave Oxford with no choice but to shelve its plans for development in Ferguson Township. After all, nobody relishes the idea of fighting court battles all over the state.

A decision by Oxford to forget construction plans in Ferguson Township could set a dangerous precedent. Other developers interested in Centre Region land might develop the attitude that trying to accomplish something in this area isn't worth the effort or the high cost in legal fees.

That's a battle Centre Region residents can't afford to lose.

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