

## 34-story Bell Tower may die

### Developer Geller locked in dispute with city board

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Photo by Fentress Architects

Fentress Architects

Bell Tower condo project, Fentress Architects' second proposal.

What was to be the most expensive condo tower

in Denver's history is likely to become history on Thursday.

Developer Buzz Geller expects to scrap his yearlong plan for the \$300 million, 34-story Bell Tower project at Speer Boulevard, Cherry Creek and Market Street after he presents it to the Lower Downtown Design Review Board. The building was to have had 33 to 35 units priced around \$1,000 per square foot.

Because of the significance of the zoning change that would allow a building of this size along Cherry Creek, the board is requiring five, instead of the usual four, votes for the project.

Geller said it is almost impossible to get five votes for even a less-controversial plan, and he expects his design to be rejected. The meeting is set for 9 a.m. at the Northern Trust Bank Community Room at 1400 16th St.

Geller said he has spent more than \$1 million on the design by architect Curtis Fentress since the board began considering it about a year ago. Geller is refusing to implement "another round of mass reduction" the planning department staff is requesting, following concerns raised by some members of the board.

Instead of the "iconic landmark" building, Geller said he plans to develop an 85-foot office tower with eight stories, retail on the ground floor, and some luxury penthouse-style condos on top. A second building, with a maximum height of 55 feet, will be slightly larger than the original office building across Cherry Creek from the

proposed tower. Buildings of this size are allowed under the current lower downtown zoning, he said.

The two smaller buildings would cover virtually the entire site, eliminating a park that was going to cover 92 percent of the site, Geller said.

## 'A year too late'

At the crux of the dispute over the initial plan, Geller disagrees with a technical interpretation of "floor plate" being used by planner Tyler Gibbs that Geller said would require him to eliminate double-height interior space. The two-story interior units allowed for large, extended balconies that would give the building its unique shape. Some have compared it to something thrown together in a Jenga building block stacking game, while others embraced it.

"We really liked the tower," said Joe Vostrejs, of Larimer Square. "We felt like it was an opportunity for Denver to get a really iconic structure. Denver is not exactly known for its vast collection of exceptional architecture."

Vostrejs said that if the board, as expected, turns down the project, it will have a chilling effect on cutting-edge design.

"It's an odd system we have, where you could have the right to build something, but effectively you do not, because the design is in the hands of essentially unelected people," Vostrejs said. "The process can be arbitrary and capricious and can effectively kill a project. Basically, it leads to the

lowest common denominator for design."

Geller said the time has passed to start over.

"It comes about a year too late," Geller said about the requested changes.

"If we had known this is what they wanted in the first meeting, we would have probably kowtowed to them, and I would have told Curt that we are barking up the wrong tree and he should make the changes."

Planner Gibbs, in a memo given to the board, wrote that "minor tweaks will not be sufficient," for the "vertical and slender," building sought by the board.

## Design process inefficient

Leaders of neighborhood groups, some that initially opposed the design but later supported it, are disappointed that the project is likely going to die.

"I'm just disappointed the way (Geller) was treated by the city," said John Maslanik, president of the Downtown Denver Residents Organization. "That's what it comes down to. I told Buzz that I think the city kind of took advantage of him."

Geller acquired the land in 2005, in a swap deal engineered by Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper. The city acquired land from Geller and partner David Paderski for the new justice center under construction on West Colfax Avenue, at a below-

market rate of \$85 per square foot. In turn, Geller's and Paderski's Paradise Land Co. bought the Bell Park land for \$60 per square foot, also considered a below-market rate.

In exchange, Hickenlooper promised to support Geller's plan to rezone the land, which is near the site of Denver's first City Hall.

Geller said Hickenlooper lived up to his part of the agreement, but said the "fundamental process" is flawed.

"I don't think the mayor or the city owes Buzz Geller or David Paderski a favor," Geller said.

But he said one of the main goals for the city is to bring more people downtown, and his experience hurts those efforts.

"That is my fundamental (complaint)," Geller said. "Hickenlooper fundamentally ran on a platform to get rid of this nonsense and streamline the system. Instead, it is a quagmire down there that is not only no better, it is worse."

Hickenlooper said that he agrees with Geller that the design process in Denver has to be more efficient.

And from the beginning, Hickenlooper said, he has publicly supported a taller building on the site. He added that he thinks Geller and the board are "getting close" to an agreement.

But he said that while he appoints board members, "I generally try not to meddle and get

involved. You pick smart, talented people to be on boards because you want to get different perspectives and get a fair, objective decision on these types of issues."

Some observers said it's not realistic that Geller could finance such an expensive project in today's soft market. But Geller disagrees.

"This was going to be 33 to 35 all different units, with unobstructed mountain views," Geller said. "The kinds of people who would buy this are in the international market. It seems to me that people who want to drive a Bentley or a Rolls-Royce are still going out to buy those cars."