

\$6 million library complex is Lauderdale Lakes' 'last hurrah'

Court ruling blocks agency from getting project funding

By Juan Ortega | South Florida Sun-Sentinel

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LAUDERDALE LAKES - Helping spruce up his city is a bittersweet prospect these days for Gary Rogers.

As director of the city's Community Redevelopment Agency, he is glad to see workers surveying land where construction is expected to start next month on a library on Oakland Park Boulevard, just east of State Road 7.

But upsetting him is how the library could be the last multimillion-dollar deal the agency brokers for several years, halting efforts to replace old, "underused" shopping plazas with new businesses and housing.

"It's our last hoorah," Rogers said of the library, which he considers the centerpiece of Bella Vista, the city's largest retail and housing project. "Thank God we had enough money in the bank to meet the cost."

His agency is among the first of South Florida's special districts to feel the effects of a Florida Supreme Court ruling that limited the way such entities operate.

The ruling has blocked the Lauderdale Lakes CRA from getting a bank loan backed by taxpayer dollars to build the library and forced it to use much of its reserve money, ensuring delays for other projects.

The court's ruling in *Strand vs. Escambia County*, made in September, said projects that depend on property taxes to pay for them must be approved by voters.

The ruling swept away legal precedent the Supreme Court set decades ago that said a local government or community redevelopment agency can issue bonds used to finance improvement projects without holding a referendum.

Most of the state's 185 redevelopment agencies, which spruce up dilapidated areas and improve downtowns, want the ruling changed to bar only what Escambia County tried: Issuing bonds backed by taxpayer money without first creating a redevelopment agency, which holds public meetings to plan projects.

The court, which has been asked to reconsider its ruling, hasn't issued a new opinion.

Meantime, the Lauderdale Lakes agency, which expects to have \$4 million in its reserves by March, is planning to pay the library's builder its share of \$3 million.

The agency is splitting the \$6 million cost of the two-story library complex, whose second floor will be a community center, with Broward County, each paying half.

Rogers said the agency's depleted pot of money could force it to wait several years for its next major deal, since the agency saves about \$300,000 annually for projects.

"It will take us 10 years to accumulate \$3 million to do our next project, which is very unfortunate," Rogers estimated.

Carol Westmoreland, executive director of the Florida Redevelopment Association, said her association, an

umbrella organization for redevelopment agencies, isn't aware of other agencies in Broward that have endured what Lauderdale Lakes has, given it was on the brink of getting a loan.

"Lauderdale Lakes was ready to go and now it's not," she said. "Other CRAs are just putting their projects aside because of the uncertainty of Strand."

But officials from some of Broward's other redevelopment agencies still are trying to decipher the ruling.

Fort Lauderdale CRA Director Al Battle said his agency has been busy with redevelopment in northwest Fort Lauderdale, using money from a \$17 million bond the city issued years ago, as well as the annual tax revenue from rising property values.

The city had planned to issue another \$23 million as part of a \$40 million bond program officials committed to years before the court ruling.

Fort Lauderdale Vice Mayor Carlton Moore said he hopes lawyers will agree that the city can still borrow the money. Otherwise, the city would go through the more arduous process of asking voters for approval if it needs more money, he said.

Holding a referendum for the library in Lauderdale Lakes wasn't an option, Rogers said. Planning for the library began five years ago and there is demand by residents for its opening next year, he said.

Also, the agency is asking what kind of referendum it could hold, because the court left it unclear who would be allowed to vote. Its questions: Would it be only voters in the redevelopment area? City voters? County voters?

If referendums were limited to city voters, City Commissioner John Billingsley said projects would stand a chance of being approved, recalling how a \$15 million bond issue was approved in 2004.

Lauderdale Lakes resident Karl Avery said he would vote yes for projects, but doubted many other voters would.

"It's going to be harder for people in the community to see changes," he said.

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