

Windermere saga ends with Azzouz land sale

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WINDERMERE - The seven-year battle over the fate of downtown in this west Orange town is officially over.

Developer **Kevin Azzouz** — who rankled many **Windermere** residents with his vision of restaurants, office buildings and condos for the heart of a town that values its dirt roads and small-village feel — has quietly sold his four acres that front Main Street.

The new owner, lifelong Windermere resident Jim Karr, 51, said he has no immediate plans to develop the property. And if he ever does, he promised to adhere to the town's dirt-road charm amid the Butler Chain of Lakes.

"At this point, we don't plan to do anything with it," he said. "And if we ever do, we'll only do what makes sense for this town. I live here, I grew up here, and this is my home."

Azzouz did not return phone calls or e-mails from the Orlando Sentinel on Tuesday seeking comment about his former planned project, Main Street Shoppes. The purchase price of the property wasn't immediately available. Karr would not say how much he paid.

Published reports, such as property sales listings, show that Azzouz's company, Kosta Holdings LLC, paid at least \$2.3 million for the parcels downtown in 2000 and 2002 combined. The Orange County Property Appraiser's Office lists the current combined assessed value at \$2.8 million.

From almost the start in the summer of 2002, when Azzouz first announced his plans for a \$50 million, 70,000-square-foot development, opposition was steep. Many residents said they feared the project would be too big and bring in too much traffic.

"Residents have seen his plans and have made their voices clear consistently," Mayor Gary Bruhn said. "This wasn't right for Windermere."

Azzouz, who made his millions by selling a Silicone Valley software business, promised from the beginning that the project would be done right.

"I want to build things, and I want to do it in a responsible manner," he said at the time. "There's no effort on my part to remake or recast the town."

The residents' most frequent request was to downsize the project.

And usually the developer's answer was no.

As the years and many protracted council meetings dragged on, the fight became less polite.

Azzouz and his representatives were met with boos at town meetings. At a 2006 meeting, Bruhn called the developer a crybaby.

Azzouz blasted the council as being more difficult than the government of communist China and said in 2006: "I'm trying to improve what is universally recognized as a run-down, dumpy little town center. I have endured micromanaging, slander, vandalism and personal threats."

Azzouz once said that he cooperated with the town by delaying his project for several years and reduced its proposed size from 70,000 square feet to 50,000.

The hardball rhetoric continued, and in early 2007, three people on the five-member Town Council told the developer that townsfolk likely would never shop or dine at anything Azzouz built, unless he compromised.

It's unclear why the developer dropped his plans, but in the past year or so he has been battling several lawsuits, foreclosures and bankruptcies, many concerning his half-built \$700 million **Veranda Park** town center in Orlando's MetroWest community.

Longtime resident and former Orange County Commissioner Vera Carter said that people who opposed Azzouz's project largely disagreed with its size.

She lamented the project's failure, however, because it promised to bring restaurants to downtown.

"We don't want the outside traffic, but we need a nice restaurant for the locals," she said.

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