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Plans for new shopping center under review

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Plans for a new shopping center in Bluffton will be reviewed at next week's Beaufort County Council meeting.

Georgia developer Jaz 278 plans to build the center on 66 acres of mostly undeveloped land near the intersection of U.S. 278 and S.C. 46. The center is expected to have several "big box" retailers, but county officials couldn't name specific stores.

On Monday, County Council's Natural Resources Committee approved a development agreement for the property that would allow 330,000 square feet of commercial space, plus 22,000 for outparcels.

The first of three public readings of the development agreement will be 5 p.m. Oct. 14, when the County Council meets in its chambers in Beaufort.

Before construction can begin at the site, contaminants from a former printing business must be cleaned up, county attorney Josh Gruber said.

Earlier this year, the developer signed a "non-responsible party" cleanup contract with the state to remove the chemicals left from a print shop that closed in the late 1980s.

As part of that contract, Jaz 278 qualifies for a tax credit from the county for cleaning up the site. When the cleanup is finished and certified by the state's Department of Health and Environmental Control, Jaz 278 would receive an income tax credit for the cost of the work, according to the agreement.

Such tax credits are an important way to clean up contaminated properties if the company or group that caused the problem has gone bankrupt or has been dissolved, Gruber said.

Without the credit, businesses would be reluctant to take on the cost of cleaning contaminated sites.

Members of the subcommittee changed the language of the development agreement Monday to explicitly cap the tax credit at the cost of the cleanup.

In other changes to the agreement, the subcommittee outlined a clearer timeline for construction if the project is approved.

If 80 percent of the properties planned for the site have not been permitted within two years of the agreement's approval, the developer will

meet annually with county staff to track the construction.

The developer also will pay an upfront fee to contribute to the landscaping and maintenance of the U.S. 278 median in front of the property, according to the agreement.

The amount of the fee was not decided Monday, but county staff will calculate the six-year cost and add it to the agreement before it is approved, said Councilman Brian Flewelling, Natural Resources Committee chairman.

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