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## Big Retail Center Set For Apollo Beach Site

By MICHAEL SASSO The Tampa Tribune

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Call it Round Two in the race to build a mall in southern Hillsborough County.

This week, a Columbus, Ohio-based development company confirmed that it plans to build a major retail and office project at Interstate 75 and Big Bend Road near Apollo Beach. The project doesn't yet have a name, but it would include up to 1 million square feet of retail space in an open-air setting, as well as office buildings and a hotel, said Steve Wathen, chief executive officer of Equity, a real estate development firm.

Equity has a contract to purchase 133 acres there for an undisclosed price but hasn't yet closed on the deal, Wathen said. The company hopes to break ground by next year on the \$200-million-plus development and open in spring 2009.

Wathen's company was the winner in what had been a free-for-all of competition for the property at Big Bend and I-75.

For the last few years, Tampa developer Ken Morin had a contract to buy the land from its owners, a south Hillsborough County family. Morin had planned to build a massive open-air shopping center called Southbend Towne Center. However, he had a falling-out with the Sumner-Thompson family ownership group, wound up in litigation against them and gave up on the mall project by last summer.

Once Morin stepped aside, as many as 20 developers from across the country made offers for the property, said Jo Alice McDonald, whose Plant City real estate firm, McDonald Realty Services, represented the landowners.

### Beating A Path To Their Door

"We had the largest developers in the country," McDonald said. "We were shocked."

Like many other projects across the country, Equity's Apollo Beach project would be a "mixed-use" center, a type of center that may have retail, office and residential buildings. Although the project's exact configuration isn't yet known, county regulations allow it to have up to 1 million square feet of retail space - about the size of Westfield Brandon mall. It also could have up to 650,000 square feet of office space and a hotel with up to 250 rooms, said Karon McDonald-Tyson, a co-owner of McDonald Realty Services.

Wathen said he has talked with several retailers who could serve as anchor tenants, but he declined to name them.

## Equity A Small Player So Far

Equity's contract to purchase the property appears to be a surprising victory for the company, which is relatively small in the retail development industry and has little track record in Florida. The company has operations in Columbus and Cincinnati and opened its Florida office in Tampa a year ago.

According to its Web site, [www.equity.net](http://www.equity.net), Wathen founded the firm in 1989 and has developed or managed retail, office, industrial and health care buildings across the country, particularly in Ohio. One of its bigger projects is called the Van Wert Towne Center, a mixed-use project in Ohio anchored by a Wal-Mart Supercenter, Wathen said.

In recent years, developers from far and wide have salivated at the booming population in southern Hillsborough County.

According to the most recent data from the Hillsborough County Planning Commission, Riverview watched its population surge from 32,377 people in 2000 to 53,337 people in 2005, an average annual growth rate of 10.5 percent, the highest in the county. Gibsonton, meanwhile, had an annual average growth rate of 7.2 percent, growing from 7,437 people to 10,537 during those five years.

One housing developer, San Diego-based Newland Communities, has no fewer than five developments in the southern Hillsborough area: FishHawk Ranch in Lithia, Rivercrest in Riverview, and MiraBay, Covington Park and Waterset in Apollo Beach.

However, until now the area has been sorely lacking shopping centers, said Henry Brosnaham, the owner of real estate firm Exit Realty Apollo Beach. Area residents either drive to the new Wal-Mart Supercenter in Gibsonton or take an 18-mile hike north to Brandon, he said.

"There's a lot of folks here and very little offered," Brosnaham said of the region's slim retail pickings.

## Site Is Prime Location

Big Bend Road has begun to take shape as the area's commercial hub. Aside from Equity's proposed new mall, Tampa-based DeBartolo Development is building a retail and bowling complex called Riverview Bell Plaza at Big Bend Road and U.S. Highway 301. Publix anchors a shopping center that opened nearby recently, and a new Sweetbay supermarket is on the way.

Equity might have to make some expensive improvements to local roadways in order to get the county to approve its mall project, local real estate brokers say. However, local real estate lawyer Ron Weaver said a mall there would benefit from thousands of residents who use Big Bend Road to get to I-75 every day.

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