

COVER  
STORY

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UNDER PROTEST, LARGO APPROVES  
\$500K CITY HALL CHANGE ORDER

OFFICIALS SAY CONTRACTOR THREATENED TO HALT WORK BEFORE COMPLETION

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LONG AND IT'S COME TO THIS AT THE END,"

-Commissioner Michael Smith

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**L**ARGO—One said it was “extortion.” Another called it “blackmail.” Two more said the city was “over a barrel.”

Those were the words that Largo city commissioners, in a rare show of displeasure, used to describe their contractor’s ultimatum on the long-awaited City Hall project: approve a \$500,000 change order or find another company to finish the nearly completed job.

The change order that came before commissioners March 3 covers work that failed final building or life-safety inspections at Horizon West Bay, Largo’s centerpiece mixed-use anchor and hoped-for downtown revitalization catalyst.

Those deficiencies must be corrected before the city can obtain an occupancy permit and move in 200 employees from the outdated municipal center at 201 Highland Ave. N., a 14-acre site that is being marketed for redevelopment.

A change order is a document that adds work or revisions to a construction contract. Since it began work in 2022, Biltmore Construction Co. has submitted 10 such orders, raising the original \$69.6 million “guaranteed maximum price” to nearly \$78 million.

That doesn’t include the \$36.1 million the city is paying to finance the project over 30 years, staff members said.

Originally scheduled for completion in November 2024, the 5-story complex at 400 West Bay Dr. — which besides city offices will house 18,000 square feet of retail space and a public parking garage — is now expected to open nearly a year and a half later, in late spring.

“I just can’t believe this has taken this long and it’s come to this at the end,” Commissioner Michael Smith said.

Adding to commissioners’ frustration was an earlier decision to approve an extra \$175,000 to help build out one of the retail spaces after the tenant, Pappas Fresh Greek, warned it would otherwise walk away.

So far, 40 percent of the commercial space has been pre-leased, said Charles Stanton, Horizon operations manager.

The Horizon West Bay project, which includes a new City Hall, retail space and a parking garage, now is expected to open in late spring. Photo by Carlos Moncada



When commissioners asked who was responsible for the cost overruns — the design architect, the contractor, the subcontractors — staff said they were still determining that and would report back.

For now, staff said, their focus is on finishing the job and opening the glass, metal and concrete building. The city plans to cover the \$500,000 cost using excess interest earned on the unspent portion of the borrowed funds.

Staff will return after the project is completed to seek commission approval on final negotiated costs associated with the overall construction project,” Jerald Woloszynski, Largo’s engineering services director, told commissioners.

City Manager John Curp said Biltmore Construction had made it clear it would not proceed with ordering the necessary parts to complete the project unless the change order was approved.

“Isn’t that called blackmail?” asked Com-

missioner Donna Holck.

“So if we don’t approve this tonight, Biltmore has indicated they will not proceed with construction and finish the project,” said Curp, who revealed the city is auditing the project’s finances.

Commissioner Curtis Holmes called the situation “backward.”

“But the other side of the coin is this is extortion,” he said. “It’s pay up or else.”

Commissioner John Lauser said city taxpayers should not have to pay for others’ mistakes.

“If they designed it wrong or installed it wrong, they shouldn’t be holding us over a barrel and telling us to pay them to fix it,” he said. “If a contractor does that at your house and it doesn’t pass inspection, they have to fix it.”

City Attorney Sarah Johnston pointed out that approving the change order would not prevent Largo from seeking reimbursement

later if it turns out the issues weren’t the city’s fault.

Two residents spoke before the commission, including former commissioner Jamie Robinson, who voted for the Horizon West Bay project in 2022.

“At some point, we have to stop treating change orders as routine and start asking hard questions,” Robinson said.

Mayor Woody Brown said Biltmore was “doing great work over there,” but shared his colleagues’ concerns while emphasizing the need to keep the project moving forward.

“We need to get in,” the mayor said. “We’re kind of over a barrel, and I hope there’s a lot of investigation into what went wrong.”

On a motion from Holmes, commissioners grudgingly voted 5-1 to approve the change order, with Smith casting the dissenting “protest vote.”