

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

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## Bal Harbour Shops submits new expansion plan, drops proposed village hall swap

### HIGHLIGHTS

Village hall will stand as Bal Harbour Shops owners reduce footprint of proposed expansion

Village council rejected swap last month

Controversy still swirls around plan as Whitmans sue vice-mayor



A new rendering of the expansion plans for the Bal Harbour Shops including keeping the current Village Hall intact. The Village Council, in a 2-2 vote, voted against the expansion plans at a special meeting April 14 at the Sea View Hotel. Zyscovich Architects

BY ANDRES VIGLUCCI

### VIDEOS



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The owners of the Bal Harbour Shops have submitted alternative plans for a substantial expansion of the luxury mall. Missing is a controversial land swap for the village's municipal hall that stalled the proposal last month.

Whitman Family Development, the mall's owners, had said they would quickly come back with a different plan after the proposed swap **failed to win support** from the village council on a 2-2 vote, which constitutes a "no." The family has been planning for five years to add 400,000 square feet to the 50-year-old mall, nearly doubling its size.

The fresh plans submitted to the village on April 29 leave the municipal hall in place. The updated plan reduces the proposed expansion footprint by about 19 percent by eliminating space for some additional boutiques and restaurants, though the project's overall value remains at \$400 million, said Whitman spokeswoman Kelly Penton. The new plan also reduces the expansion of the Neiman Marcus store, one of the mall's two anchors, though the store will still add 20,000 square feet, she said.

Unaffected are plans to to expand the second anchor, Saks Fifth Avenue, which would move from its present site on Collins Avenue to just east of village hall, and to add the state's first Barneys New York store on the present Saks site, Penton said.

"The updated plan meets all of our goals, albeit in a different configuration," said Matthew Whitman Lazenby, president and CEO of Whitman Family Development, in a statement. "We're optimistic that this plan will allay any concerns that certain council members had."

Penton stressed that the new submission is not a redesign but one of two sets of alternative blueprints the company prepared for the village to consider. The Whitmans have said Bal Harbour Mayor Martin Packer, who abstained from last month's vote, wanted to consider only one proposal.

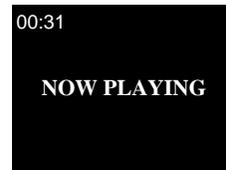
The family had initially proposed to swap the Bal Harbour village hall parcel, which is adjacent to the mall's southwest corner on 96th Street, for a two-acre property. The Whitmans would also have built and paid for a new village hall. The deal would have required voter approval.

Though foregoing the land swap removes a big bone of contention in the expansion effort, the Whitmans' proposal remains surrounded by acrimony and controversy. Some Bal Harbour residents have vocally objected to the expansion because they fear increased traffic and years of construction. The Whitman's aggressive approach has also not endeared them to residents and some elected officials.

After the family firm reached an agreement to buy the adjacent Church by the Sea for the expansion and build a replacement elsewhere, the congregation voted to move out and demolish the church without a plan for a permanent new home, prompting an unsuccessful **last-minute effort by preservationists** to have it



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declared historic by Miami-Dade County. The Whitmans sued both the county and the village amid the battle, though they later dropped the legal action. Critics, meanwhile, blamed the Whitmans for the rushed demolition, which started without permits.

The Whitmans also posted [an unusual statement](#) on their website strongly suggesting that their competitors at Aventura Mall and the Miami Design District are behind a Bal Harbour civic group that's opposing the mall expansion and also supported efforts to block the church demolition.

In March, the Whitmans also sued the village and vice-mayor Patricia Cohen, who has been critical of the church demolition and the expansion plans. The suit claims the village and Cohen have been slow to respond to a request for emails, texts and voicemails that the Whitmans say show the vice-mayor is biased against the expansion because of a friendship with members of the Soffer family that owns Aventura.

Like the rejected plan, the alternative proposal calls for expanding sidewalks, improving traffic flow and adding a public plaza on Collins on mall property, Penton said.

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