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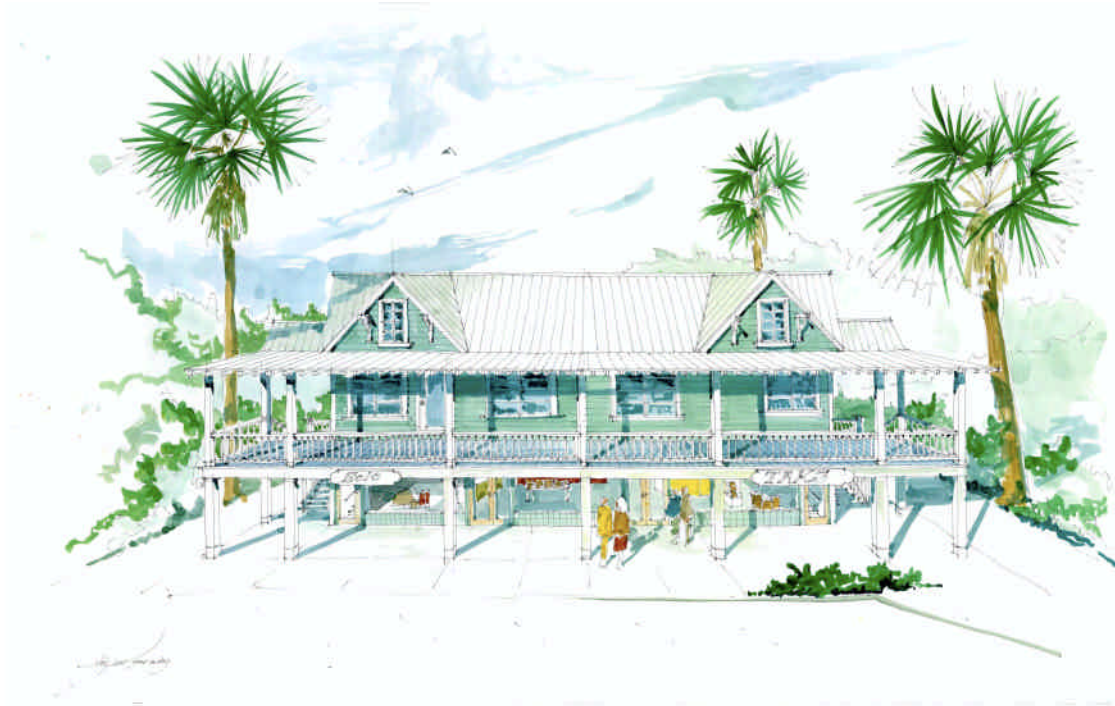
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Saving Anna Maria's historic Pine Avenue

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ANNA MARIA -- Ed Chiles knows there is too much history and Old Florida charm to lose on Pine Avenue.

That's why he and two other businessmen partnered several years ago on a restoration project for the two-lane, quarter-mile-long road stretching from the Gulf of Mexico to Tampa Bay.

Chiles, along with Michael Coleman and Ted LaRoche, formed the investment group Pine Avenue Restoration LLC to purchase historic cottages along the street.

The partners are planning to re-develop the cottages and vacant land into two-story buildings that they say will create a boutique shopping and residential district. And Chiles has submitted site plans with the city.

The first level will house retail shops, with the top floors available for residential use.

"This was born out of our concern that we were losing our boutique business district," said Chiles,

who owns the Sandbar Restaurant just off the western end of Pine Avenue.

With only 1 percent of the land in the city of Anna Maria zoned commercial, Chiles said, the city can't afford to lose its only business district.

Colorful cottages with white-picket fences and front porches or patios line the narrow road of Pine Avenue. The road is often traveled by pedestrians and cyclists who share the road with motorists, most of whom are heading to or from the pier on Tampa Bay.

Near the pier is a small plaza that consists of some small shops of what remains of Anna Maria's small business district.

"Pine Avenue is the main street in Anna Maria," Chiles said. "We were losing the ability to have a boutique business district which is a critical thread of Anna Maria."

Cottages on Pine Avenue date as far back as 1912, and a majority cropped up in as more settlers came to the island.

The street used to be the main access point to Anna Maria Island before the Anna Maria Island Bridge was built.

Ferries would drop off travelers at the city pier on Tampa Bay, and visitors from Tampa and beyond would make their way down Pine Avenue to spend time at the Gulf beaches.

Artist renderings for the new buildings feature two-story structures that maintain the Florida-cracker style architecture. The top floor features wrap-around wooden porches, and green steel will be used on the roofs.

Chiles and his partners have already closed on three properties consisting of seven lots: 315 Pine Ave., with two lots; 401 Pine Ave., also two lots; and 503 Pine Ave., three lots. They also have 16 more properties under contract they may develop.

Next month, the city of Anna Maria planning and zoning board is expected to vote on the site plans for the proposed two-story retail/residential structures.

That approval will be final and construction on the seven lots could begin soon thereafter.

Mayor Fran Barford supports the project because it upholds the character and history of the neighborhood.

"We're feeling good about it," Barford said. "The whole vision for development and revitalization of Pine Avenue is a good, well thought-through project."

Coleman said that is one of the main goals of the project.

"The Pine Avenue restoration vision is to restore the original vision for Anna Maria," Coleman said. "We want to keep the charm everybody fell in love with here."