Atlanta's quiet Beltline baron

Selig Enterprises, which has about 30 acres on the Beltline, is examining its alternatives

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As developer Wayne Mason butts heads with residents and Beltline steering officials over plans for his portion of the 22-mile intown corridor, another developer has been quietly reviewing options for his own considerable holdings there.

Steve Selig, chairman and president of Atlanta retail developer Selig Enterprises Inc., has about 30 acres on the Beltline -- roughly the same amount of developable land as Mason, who has said he plans to donate half of the 70 acres he owns for public use. The Beltline, a 25-year initiative projected to attract $20 billion in new private development, will be driven by the creation of a circuit of public parks, trails and transit around downtown and Midtown.

But unlike Mason, a Gwinnett County investor who bought his Beltline acreage last year for $25 million from Norfolk Southern Corp. (NYSE: NSC), Selig Enterprises has owned most of the parcels for a decade or more. Some were purchased in the run-up to the 1996 Olympics, when speculation that the games would revitalize blighted Atlanta neighborhoods ran high.

In addition, Selig Enterprises' 19 Beltline properties -- most of them small offices, storefronts or warehouses -- are scattered around Atlanta, as opposed to Mason's tract, which is entirely in the northeast. Thirteen, including Ansley Mall, are in the northern half of the city; the other six are in and around West End. The West End parcels in particular could benefit from incentives the city intends to offer to promote development in neglected areas of town though a Beltline tax allocation district (TAD).

If approved by the Atlanta City Council, Atlanta School Board and Fulton County Commission, the TAD would divert the revenue those agencies would normally enjoy from property tax increases along the Beltline to pay for $1.7 billion of the project's $2.1 billion to $2.6 billion cost, as well as the aforementioned incentives. The council is expected to vote Nov. 7 on the proposal, which developers say will signal that the city is serious about the project and that they can then afford to be as well.

Selig's total holdings encompass about 250 properties, concentrated in Midtown and Buckhead. His company specializes in retail, although it also acquires, manages and develops office space. Selig more recently ventured into mixed-use developments, such as the $100 million Plaza Midtown towers and the $90 million District at Howell Mill, that could serve as the model for higher-density projects along the Beltline.

The Beltline would accelerate development on Selig's existing parcels and be a significant factor in new acquisitions, said Selig Executive Vice President David Witt.

"We are examining our alternatives," Witt said. "In a couple of locations, we're having our architects look to see what might be done down the line. We're trying to keep track of everything that's happening and be ready to move if something comes along that is of interest to us."

"I'm interested in adjacent properties to anything we have," Selig said. "Our philosophy has always been to try and acquire properties, improve them and then hold them."

The company is even waiting on the Beltline to finalize redevelopment plans for Ansley Mall, its largest property on the loop, which sits at the opposite end of Piedmont Park from Mason's two proposed condo towers and which Witt called a great potential tie-in.

Witt said Selig has tossed around several different ways to overhaul the mall but is holding off until after the TAD is approved and perhaps until some of the infrastructure improvements it would spur around the Beltline are in place. A section of the mostly unused railroad tracks that would make up the Beltline's spine runs directly behind the mall.

"Most people seem to think it [the Beltline] really is going to happen, and I'm among those people," Witt said. "It's just a question of when."

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