

Tower is what downtown needs

Tampa City Council members will reveal a lot about their commitment to developing a vibrant urban core Thursday when they consider a proposed 36-story residential tower next to the Straz Center for the Performing Arts. The project, which will add 500 residents downtown and offer 10,000 square feet of retail on its ground floor, is precisely what downtown needs to attract people and enterprise. As Tampa Mayor Bob Buckhorn puts it, "With more residential, you get more retail; with more retail, you get an 18-hour day. You activate the Riverwalk." Yet a venture that most cities would relish has been subjected to ever-mutating attacks. At first there were understandable fears the tower would eliminate the skybridge that runs from the William F. Poe Parking Garage to the John F. Germany Public Library and the Straz. The developers promptly pledged to retain the walkway. Then concerns turned to the building's impact on the Straz. But the \$85 million development will reconfigure surrounding roads to slow traffic, add landscaping and increase the Straz's ground-level parking. All this will greatly benefit the Straz and the library, which both suffer from the current dysfunctional street grid. The builder is providing insurance to protect the Straz from any construction delays that affect attendance. The developers, Greg Minder and Phillip Smith, have pledged a \$1 million gift to the Straz and plan to collaborate on marketing and advertising. The Straz board has shown its support, voting 32-16 in favor of the project. Then the naysayers focused on claims the tower would wall off the river, though the building is 220 feet from the waterway. No one complained about the Tampa Museum of Art being built just 67 feet from the river or tried to stop the Straz, which is 125 feet from it. Part of the development will include a walkway from the Riverwalk to a pedestrian crossing on Cass Street, allowing pedestrians to safely continue walking along the river. The Friends of the Riverwalk, understandably, back the project. And now there are nebulous worries about the tower's "scale," as if high-rises don't belong downtown. The tower will be built on a one-acre parcel the city will make available by putting together two landscaped medians, parts of the roads in front of the Straz and a bit of the center's entranceway. Developers will pay the city \$4 million for all this. One acre is hardly an unusual tract for such a project, and renderings show a building as attractive as any downtown tower. It is designed so that lower floors do not loom over the street. It's not surprising when people complain that a new building is disrupting their view or offending their taste. But council members should focus on Tampa's future. The tower represents, as Buckhorn says, "what we have designed downtown to be." If council members want urban development, if they want more people living and working downtown and more businesses catering to them, they'll back this development.