



HOW TO SELECT A LAND DEVELOPMENT PARTNER

by Pape-Dawson Engineers, Inc. **SEPTEMBER 2022**

In the current fraught real estate environment, developers want to ensure their investment in a new property takes no wrong turns. A crucial decision—just as important as selecting the property itself—is selecting a professional partner to work with you through the long process of land development.

A knowledgeable, trustworthy land development firm as a partner is necessary for success. They bring essential knowledge of planning and engineering to the table. But how can a developer start to find one? Professional websites and completed projects don't often tell the whole story.

In your search for a land development partner, here are some things to look for:

They're curious

"A good land development planner will ask you lots of questions," says Bill Anderson, Senior Vice President at Pape-Dawson Engineers, Inc. Nearly four decades in the business has taught him which questions are most important to ask, and he asks them early in the process, when they can best inform everyone's decision making. "You want to identify problems up front, so we have plenty of time to address them," he says.

Items to be discussed involve infrastructure, both existing and planned, including thoroughfares and utilities, and the client's desire for on-site schools and trail systems. It is also important to study the surrounding street network to determine the potential impact of existing and new traffic to the

thoroughfare system. Site drainage is always a key concern and drives the land planning process, so a good partner will be sure to respect the existing drainage constraints, when possible. "If you suddenly have to fix a dam you weren't expecting, for example, it could become very expensive," adds Aaron Hunsaker, Senior Planner at Pape-Dawson Engineers. It's best for everyone to learn these details early.

They have an eye for more than just engineering and planning

"Indifference towards people and the reality in which they live is actually the one and only cardinal sin in design." —Dieter Rams

A good land development partner will understand your investment from the perspective of future use and marketing needs as well. "We look at the macro and micro level," says Bill. "What do you want to do with the property? And what's already been developed around the property, in terms of price point and character?"

Getting into these character details early on is important. A good planner needs to understand the overall vision for the built environment to ensure end users will be happy, and that includes asking questions about visibility, site access, connectivity, amenities, and impact. A long list of questions over a wide range of issues is an excellent sign, from property encroachments to pad sizes, from entryway visual character to tree ordinances. "Tree ordinances change from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, and working through differences later on in the process can take

hours-long meetings,” says Bill. This can add time, costs, and frustration to a project if it isn’t addressed from the start.

These discussions can also be crucial for finding out how the local community feels about your development. What your new neighbors think about your upcoming project has many implications, including for things that are sometimes less noticeable to the average eye, like utility easements.

“In most cases, you can’t just force your neighboring properties to put easements through their land,” Aaron says. You will have to work out the details with each neighbor to ensure everyone can benefit.

They have a desire to walk the land

“Initially, we’ll get the lay of the land with Google Earth,” says Bill, “but by our third meeting, I’ll want to have walked the land to get a feel for the property.” Walking on the ground or driving over its terrain allows your development partner to see the property up close and reveals aspects that bird’s-eye visuals cannot show.

“Some sites have strange topography, with complexities you just can’t see without walking it,” Bill adds. Existing slope is a common development problem. Some property is too steep to keep sites affordable, depending on the target occupant. Too flat a site, on the other hand, can present significant drainage challenges.

Walking the land can reveal other important aspects, too. “One piece of ground I walked had a fantastic view of downtown San Antonio,” says Aaron. It was a selling point a typical aerial or map view could not reveal. In the Metroplex, a terrain walk revealed to Bill that “you could hear the traffic from the President George Bush Turnpike.” With that knowledge, he recommended a change to the original plan so future users would hear less noise.

They already have a good reputation

Do some real research on your potential land development partner, advises Bill. “Integrity counts. Don’t get hitched to someone with a bad reputation.”

When you ask around, a great land development partner should be known for their credibility and reasonableness on working through complex issues. A project done quickly is not a good sign if important details were missed and potential profit was lost in the process. A project done in a community may not be a good sign if that community is unhappy with the end result. Your development partner’s sense of professional ethics should be a good match for yours, and you should find them reasonable to work with.

Indications of a good reputation in a community include:

- Presentations and consultation with government. When planning and engineering partners are welcome and familiar faces at City and Council meetings, it’s a strong indicator that a municipality trusts their work.
- Participation in professional organizations. Solid development partners will be active in the Urban Land Institute and other similar organizations that work to promote and improve the industry.
- Opinions of past and current clients, contractors, and coworkers. A track record of fair dealing and excellent quality predicts a smooth road for their work with you, too. Repeat clients especially demonstrate satisfaction with a job well done.

Choosing your land development partner is the first step in a crucial relationship that will last years. “Select a partner wisely,” says Bill. “You’ll want someone who feels just as invested in this project as you are.”