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## Scientology expansion may hit snag

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CLEARWATER — With the Internal Revenue Service proclaiming them an official tax-free religion, the Church of Scientology had hoped to quickly launch a \$42 million expansion downtown.

But the city of Clearwater has put the church on notice that it might not be able to grow too fast.

The six-story office tower and auditorium Scientologists plan to build across the street from their Fort Harrison Hotel may be so big that it qualifies as a "Development of Regional Impact" under the state's growth management laws, according to a letter the city sent the church Wednesday.

That means the Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council and other government agencies would have to study potential impacts of the project on surrounding areas.

If the development drastically would burden traffic, water, sewer or other systems, city or state officials could veto the project, said Julia Greene, the council's executive director.

All told, the studies could take six to 18 months, said Marina Bennington, community program administrator for the state Department of Community Affairs in Tallahassee.

Any office development of at least 300,000 square feet is considered a Devel-

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opment of Regional Impact. Even if an office project is only 80 percent of that — 240,000 square feet — a city can request that a developer go through the process.

However, Scientology officials said Wednesday night their plans called for a building of only 170,000 square feet. Furthermore, they understood churches to be exempt from Development of Regional Impact requirements, said Scientology spokesman Richard Haworth.

That's not the way Pinellas County Planning Director Brian Smith understands it.

"I don't think it matters if they're a church or not," Smith said, adding that even Pinellas County had to go through the pro-

cess for its criminal courts complex.

And City Planning Director Scott Shuford said he had heard the project could range anywhere from 150,000 square feet to 300,000 square feet.

Scientology officials first revealed their purchase of the former Gray Moss Inn in March 1991, announcing plans for an all-glass exterior building with a 65-foot-high atrium and a glass-enclosed walkway connecting it with the Fort Harrison Hotel across the street.

They said the project would be finished by May of this year.

Two and a half years later, they have knocked down the old Gray Moss Inn, but built nothing.

A newly printed invitation to a fund-raising event for the new building notes that now the suggested \$75 to \$1,000 donation will be

tax-deductible.

The building will consist mainly of offices for auditing — a one-on-one counseling process in which Scientologists try to unearth and dispose of negative thoughts from their past.

The building will accommodate 2,000 Scientologists and 1,000 staff members.

The project also will include a 2,500-seat auditorium.

The development will bring more visitors than ever to Clearwater to help the local economy, Scientology President Heber Jentsch said in a tour through town this week.

The Development of Regional Impact process would make sure all those newcomers did not overtax the city's resources, city officials said.