

Convention Center plans ambitious expansion

By: Robin Shannon, Managing Editor May 27, 2015 1 Comment

A vision for development that includes new restaurants, retail shops, a residential component and a headquarters hotel could drastically change the face of riverfront property adjacent to the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center.

But the developers behind the proposal and the facility's leadership say the project must be planned properly. They and the Port of New Orleans also are considering the potential traffic impacts in the area.

The Convention Center is looking to build what amounts to a new riverfront neighborhood on a roughly 47-acre tract of land upriver from the facility. The property had previously been pegged for additional exhibition space for the center, but plans were shelved following Hurricane Katrina.

Convention Center General Manager Bob Johnson said staff went back to the drawing board to come up with a better investment of the facility's money that would help bring new events to the building. The plan, announced last year, includes investment of \$150 million to improve infrastructure in an effort to attract private developers who would spend as much as \$700 million on assorted amenities.

"We saw this as the best investment of our money outside of new raw exhibition space," Johnson said. "It would be among the largest private investments the city has seen."

The convention center solicited developers for ideas last summer and is now in talks with a joint team that includes Howard Hughes Corp. and local developers Darryl Berger and Joe Jaeger. Johnson said the facility's board is currently conducting a vetting process and no formal development agreements have been signed. He said an agreement could come by the end of the year.

The proposal from Howard Hughes/Berger/Jaeger includes a more than 1,000-room convention center headquarters hotel by MGM Grand, more than 1,400 residential units including townhouses, apartments, condos and skylofts, a riverfront building with 250,000 square feet of retail and restaurant space, a cultural campus with higher education and research tenants and a tower-like structure offering views of the river.

"It's a rare thing to have 47 acres of vacant land within the core of a city," said Mark Bulmash, Howard Hughes senior vice president for development. "Our goal is to create a community-conscious development that could be a seminal project for the city. It could serve as an opportunity to knit different neighborhoods together and bring more residents to the riverfront."

Bulmash said everything on the table is strictly preliminary and all part of an evolving project. He said the entire development would take years to execute.

"It needs to be planned and executed well," Bulmash said. "We've been in many discussions with assorted stakeholders so that they all can understand the project."

According to the proposal, the project would be part of a new economic development district along the river, where special sales taxes would be imposed to pay for new commercial developments.

The first step in the overarching plan was executed earlier this month, when the Convention Center's governing board approved a resolution to begin construction of a \$65 million linear park along Convention Center Boulevard from Poydras to Henderson streets. The park would create a pedestrian-friendly corridor with outdoor meeting space, green areas, and "people movers" that would help get convention goers where they need to be.

Johnson said that project includes dropping Convention Center Boulevard from four lanes to two and rearranging traffic patterns to alleviate clogged arteries.

"It has become a real struggle for pedestrians to get across the boulevard and weave in and out of traffic," Johnson said. "The changes will create an active green space for downtown."



Developers envision a new neighborhood upriver from the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center with restaurants, retail, residences and a hotel. (Courtesy Ernest N. Morial Convention Center)

The Convention Center is currently working with the Port of New Orleans and the city planning department on a traffic study to determine the impact of a change in traffic patterns in the warehouse district. The study is still in its early stages.

Johnson said the combination of Dallas-based Howard Hughes Corp., which owns and operates the Riverwalk, and local developers Berger and Jaeger, who own an assortment of hotels and other properties in the city, offer separate talents that give the project the best chance to succeed, adding that it is imperative that the plans match what the Convention Center envisions for the tract.

Bulmash said Hughes is bullish on the opportunities for growth within the city as it approaches its tricentennial in 2018.

"There are uses coming online in the city that weren't occurring before," he said. "This is about keeping New Orleans a premier destination for convention traffic."

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ONE COMMENT



stanleyst@live.com

May 27, 2015 at 4:38 pm

A Proposal for hotel should not be on the cards,all the hotels within orleans parish contribute towards the convention centre and in the future it will become competition, is an issue,I think hoteliers who contribute towards the fees and taxes which promote the convention centre should have a vote,otherwise all the other proposals are productive.

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