

College Park gets six proposals for project

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*By Meghan Mullan
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College Park has received six proposals from developers for a multi-million dollar project that could significantly change downtown.

The proposals came in response to the city's request for submissions to build a parking garage along with retail, residential or office space on the current municipal center site.

The request also asked developers to consider building on two sites on Knox Road.

The council and the staff now are reviewing bids, which are being kept confidential, said Mayor Stephen Brayman.

JPI Apartment Development LLP of Texas, RCP Development Co. of the District with First Worthing Corp. from Dallas, Mark Vogel Cos. of Greenbelt, Opus East LLC of Rockville, the Otis Warren Co. of Baltimore with SJM Partners of Potomac and Clark Co. of Bethesda and the Capstone Development Corp. of Birmingham, Ala., have submitted bids.

Brayman said the council plans to share the details of any potential project with the public so that residents can react and give feedback.

The council will also consult with business owners and residents before choosing a developer for the project

Stephanie Stulich, president of the Old Town Civic Association, said she is eager to see revitalization.

"We would like see the businesses downtown cater to residents of all ages," she said.

Downtown has good restaurants, she said, but residents have to shop elsewhere, which she thinks is a problem.

"We'd like to see more upscale retail downtown," she said.

R.J. Bentley's Restaurant owner John Brown is concerned with parking.

"The impetus for this (redevelopment) was parking," Brown said. "This city is way behind in providing parking and parking garages."

Brown commended the city for moving the parking garage project forward, but is leery of additional retail and residential buildings.

"The bottom line is we need parking," he said. "It won't work unless you look after what you've already got here. What is here now needs a parking garage."

City Manager Samuel Finz said the concept of mixed-use development, that includes parking and retail or other uses, is essential to the project's financial viability.

"The cost of financing a stand alone parking garage at current interest rates... could not be done," he said. "College Park can't generate enough revenue ... to pay down debt service on the loan (to build a garage)."

The city plans to create a special taxing district in the downtown business corridor, but estimates it will still need more revenue.

Finz said the city came up with the idea of mixed-use development to help cover the costs of a garage. The mixed-use concept would create a retail anchor in the city to attract more business, he said. Finz said the project would increase the city's tax base.

If the city chooses one of the redevelopment plans, which it plans to do in the next 90 days, it will have to raze the municipal center. The city is considering four sites to relocate its offices, including The Friends School building on Calvert Road, a parking located across the street from City Hall on Knox Road, a plot next to Davis Hall and an area next to the Branchville Fire Department.

Councilman Eric Olson (Dist. 3) said six bids for the city's project is a good sign that the city is moving in the right direction.

"It's very exciting that six bids came in from experienced developers," he said. "It shows that College Park is becoming a very hot area for revitalization. It bodes well for our future. We would like to create a more vibrant downtown and commercial district."

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