

Developers pitch retail and homes for courthouse

By Dustin Luca, Staff Writer
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SALEM — Three development companies want to knock down the old district courthouse on Washington Street and replace it with multi-story buildings containing a mix of more residences and retail for the downtown. A city board could choose one of those plans to move forward by the end of the week.

Earlier this year, following up on passage of a bill to allow the Salem Redevelopment Authority to seek bids on the state property, the city put a call out to developers for proposals on the district courthouse — a tired structure that’s been vacant since 2012 — to breathe some new life into that corner of Washington Street.

Three proposals came back, and they will all be publicly reviewed by the SRA over the next two nights. Each proposal will get an hour of the board’s time at its regular meeting Wednesday, beginning at 6 p.m. The board then intends to vote Thursday.

City Planning Director Lynn Duncan confirmed Tuesday that all three developers are proposing to tear down the existing building. “It was what we expected, and it was clear in the (request for proposals) that the SRA would entertain demolition proposals,” she said.



The first proposal is a partnership with Salem Renewal Ventures LLC and Centercorp Retail Properties. They propose “a new mixed-use retail and residential building consisting of vibrant and energetic street-level retail space and 40 high-end rental apartments,” according to bid documents. The Salem Renewal Ventures bid offers \$100,000 for the property and would have two commercial units and 40 parking spaces. It would cost about \$7.9 million, including acquisition costs.

Somerville-based RCG LLC represents the second proposal, set to take the stage at 7 p.m. The company has developed several projects now around the downtown and is also behind the Washington at Dodge Project, which proposes a 110-room hotel with 70 residential units and more than 20,000 square feet of retail space on Dodge Street.

RCG wants to erect two buildings for the site: a three-and-a-half-story residential building with five townhouses and a four-story mixed-use building with first floor retail and three more floors of residential or commercial space.

The project would cost \$8.9 million with residences in the second building or \$9.5 million if the second building is all commercial. Twenty-two parking spaces are proposed.

The third proposal, to be presented at 8 p.m., comes from Diamond Sinacori LLC, out of Boston. The firm offers to buy the site for \$100,000 “in order to have a financeable project” and replace it with a

six-story building with 61 condominiums and 82 parking spaces — 61 spots underground and 21 “at grade.”

The first floor would have retail space, including “a possible signature Petit Robert restaurant.” Floors two through five would feature condos, and the sixth floor will include “a club room and fitness center.” Duncan said the RFP response reflected “three solid proposals.”

“They’re all about the same height. They all meet zoning,” she said. “I think one is 63 feet, one is 64 feet and one is 65 feet.”

And the field could be narrowed down to a single proposal Thursday night.

“Could (SRA) need more time to review if they have outstanding questions that they want us to look into? That’s possible,” Duncan said. “But they’ve had the proposals for a while. They have the interviews Wednesday and will be able to ask questions directly of the [developers].”

Wednesday’s meeting will be held on the third floor of the City Hall Annex at 120 Washington St., starting at 5 p.m. to discuss other business before the RFPs.

A second meeting is scheduled for Thursday, starting at 6 p.m. in the same location, to first discuss the sites in a closed-door session and possibly take a vote.

“Any discussion of a real estate transaction, if there’s any negotiation openly, we wouldn’t want to do it in public,” Duncan said. “The city solicitor told us we didn’t have to make the proposals public at any event. We could’ve kept them private until the SRA made its decision.”

But “in the interest of transparency, and because it’s an open site, we haven’t done that,” she explained.

Should a vote take place on Thursday, it would happen in open session once the board reconvened from its private portion of the meeting, according to an agenda for the evening.

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