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Assistant City Manager/DPD Director

Kevin E. Coughlin
Deputy Director

MEMORANDUM

TO: Kevin J. Murphy, City Manager

FROM: Kevin Coughlin, Deputy Director

SUBJECT: MOTION OF 2/14/17 BY COUNCILOR SAMARAS/COUNCILOR LEARY
REQUEST CITY MANAGER HAVE DPD PROVIDE A REPORT REGARDING THE
ECONOMIC POTENTIAL FOR THE LOWELL HIGH SCHOOL SITE IN THE EVENT
THAT THE SCHOOL WAS TO BE MOVED

In the event that Lowell High School was to be moved from its present site, the Department of Planning and Development (DPD) has explored potential uses for the current Lowell High School site.

The total site area of the current Lowell High School site is 285,043 square feet, or 6.54 acres. The buildable potential of the site, based on the under current zoning is 1,140,172 square feet. The site is located in a Downtown Mixed Use (DMU) zone and this designation allows a wide variety of commercial, retail, hotel, business, laboratory and institutional uses as of right. The lot shape and dimensions do not appear to pose unusual constraints to development and much of the site is relatively level and at grade and would support many types of development. The physical characteristics of the property will allow most types of commercial, retail, or industrial uses.

Potential Site Uses

- Housing/Mixed Use
FY2017 residential tax rates are \$14.92 per \$1,000 assessed.
- Commercial
FY2017 commercial and industrial rates are \$30.64 per \$1,000 assessed.
- Public Use by the City
Police and Fire Departments could rehab building(s) and move central offices to the current high school site. This could create new opportunities at JFK Plaza.
- Municipal Agencies
The City would have the option of utilizing future space for key departments instead of building new structures.

The DPD staff also interviewed five successful local developers actively engaged within the City. In summary, their recommendations for potential uses are as follows:

1. Create a mixed use residential/retail project along the canal adjacent to Lucy Larcom Park. This would include over 100 luxury residential units on the upper floors with restaurants, retail shops, and a theatre on the ground floor to create a destination for people to gather. This will also attract people into the downtown. Do not build offices and do not build apartments. This type of development would create a boost for the tax base for 5-10 years.
2. Open up Moody Street again, and move the Fire and Police Stations out of the downtown. Build some parking at the JFK Plaza to assist the downtown and to open up the Acre Neighborhood. Open up everything that covers the canal waterway from the end of Dutton Street to the Tsongas Arena. Then develop a market rate, mixed use development. The strength of the original high school buildings is much stronger than anything built today. Renovate the buildings instead of demolishing and rebuilding.

3. Create a “village within a village” utilizing the present properties. Renovation and reuse is much better than building new. Copy a similar model used in other communities and other States. Create a mixed use combination of market rate rental and condo units. You will need the income from these market rate units to support the new retail and service environment. The utilities are already at the site so that is a big benefit for any development. Understand and utilize the advantages of the many amenities within the City including the National Park. Create a Live, Work, Play environment utilizing the beauty of the canals and green space.
4. This could be a “perfect bookend” to the efforts of UMass Lowell to build out their campus. As it is already off the tax rolls, the impact would be much less and would bring more students spending into the downtown. This would also better define Lowell as a “college town” in its positioning and branding.

If more private sector (taxable) ownership was desired, it is perfect as an extension of the work of the University for incubator space, shared business resources, and “hybrid and creative” programs sponsored by large private sector businesses, e.g. Raytheon, Kronos, etc., to utilize the brain power of the University in their technology sector and getting innovative products to the market that benefit the private sector and encourage their reinvestment into the Lowell area.

5. Lowell needs to look at the bigger picture when it comes to this project. Definitely the cornerstone of anything at this site will be market rate housing. This will be the key sustainer for further development of retail and restaurants. A mixed use project is the only sustainable activity that can add value to the entire downtown and Acre Neighborhood. Use the canal frontage and open up new parking and multi-age safe, convenient citizen gathering areas.

The City should look at this project as a team approach by getting the right mix of qualified people around the table – both public and private. It will take a comprehensive team to be successful at achieving a final goal that benefits the public and private sectors. This should be looked at as one piece of the puzzle for the entire City and the downtown. Other pieces that should be included in the same planning are the Hamilton Canal Innovation District, Lowell Housing Authority improvements, UMass Lowell future expansion, and the Acre Neighborhood. All of these will have different goals but contribute to the successful environment we are trying to create.

Of course, any potential development would need to go through the normal permitting and approval processes. In conclusion, the current Lowell High School site has economic potential for a variety of uses. DPD will continue to provide information for any scenario that is requested.

KC/ns

5/25/17

cc: Diane N. Tradd, Assistant City Manager/DPD Director