

Housing project proposed in Northampton at Roundhouse lot behind Pulaski Park

Fred Contrada, The Republican By Fred Contrada, The Republican
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The Roundhouse parking lot in Northampton, seen here, is now being considered as a site for new housing.

(The Republican file)

NORTHAMPTON – After eying an office building and a hotel to fill the **Roundhouse** lot behind Pulaski Park, Northampton got a new take on a use for the space Tuesday: housing.

Utile, Inc., a Boston design firm that is studying the one-acre lot for the city, pitched the idea to a Council Chambers packed with architects, developers, past and present city officials and residents. All have a cautious eye on the parcel, which abuts the rear of **Pulaski Park** and is in the heart of downtown Northampton.

The City Council declared the land surplus in 2005 and began looking for a suitable project with the caveat that there be no net loss in the 182 public parking spaces that currently fill the lot. When former mayor Mary Clare Higgins chose a proposed hotel over a commercial building, she nearly sparked a revolt.

The **Hilton Garden Inn**, a proposed \$15-million, 112-room hotel that would have risen five stories behind the park, fizzled in 2010 when developers could not secure a \$12 million bond required by the council. Since then, the lot has lain dormant, except for some toxic waste cleanup.

Mayor David J. Narkewicz recently revived interest in the lot, naming an ad hoc committee to study possible uses. MassDevelopment pitched in some money to hire Utile, which presented its ideas to the public on Tuesday.

City Councilor Own Freeman-Daniels said there was brisk discussion among the 50 or so people in attendance when Timothy Love, a principle at the Boston firm, suggested a development of 45-60 housing units. As **Utile** envisions it, the bottom two stories of the complex would comprise a parking garage, with additional levels of housing at or above park level. The mix of housing and exact number of units were not spelled out because Utile is suggesting a “scheme” and not presenting a plan, said Narkewicz, who was among those in attendance.

“They’re studying what the possibilities are for the parcel,” he said. “How it fits in in terms of size, parking and what’s viable.”

Freeman-Daniels, who chaired the meeting, said there was some enthusiasm for housing because it will create new property taxes and bring more people into the center of town. With a new hotel currently under construction on Conz Street, Northampton no longer needs the rooms, Freeman-Daniels said. A hotel would also require more parking spaces than a housing development, he said.

Love maintained that Pulaski Park should be a focal point of the project, according to Narkewicz, although his proposal does not add 30 feet to the park as the hotel would have. Some feel Pulaski Park is a long under-used resource that Northampton should redesign. Love likes the design proposals for the park, Narkewicz said.

The mayor said he was pleased by the tone of the discussion Tuesday.

“Many people said they felt like this is a good restart of the process,” he said.

Utile will process that feedback and make further recommendations to the ad hoc committee, which could then host another forum, Narkewicz said.

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