

## Building ideas unveiled for Northampton's downtown Round House lot

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NORTHAMPTON — Seeking to balance the need for economic development and the desire for more public space downtown, a consultant presented several samples of how the Round House lot might be developed to a standing-room crowd Tuesday night.

In kicking off his presentation at the council chambers, Timothy Love, a principal at Utile, the Boston urban design firm leading the pre-development study of the site, called the Round House lot behind Pulaski Park critical in moving downtown forward.

“It’s in a juicy spot,” Love said.

Development at the site has lagged since a controversial proposal to build a hotel there fell apart a few years ago. Earlier this year, Mayor David J. Narkewicz moved to kick-start the site’s development.

Love was careful to clarify that what he presented Tuesday was not a formal plan or even what Utile might recommend to the city as part of a request-for-proposals package. Rather, the ideas are intended to show financially feasible options within a three-to-five-year period.

Based on the projected market during that timeframe, Utile zeroed in on housing for the site. Three of the proposals Love unveiled depicted a residential building or buildings with either 36, 45 or 62 units. He said the smaller proposal would likely not attract developers, and the larger one is probably not the best fit for the site. A fourth schematic showed an office building, which Love discarded as too expensive and not workable.

In all of the scenarios, Utile envisioned two levels of parking on the ground floor, with the residential units on top. The parking decks would boost the number of parking spaces at the site beyond the 204 required by the city.

In these examples, the residential building would feature a community space that would open onto the south side of Pulaski Park.

Love said Utile paid special attention to Pulaski Park, which is also in line for redevelopment, in its research and sought ways to improve pedestrian connections between the park and parking lot. It worked off four major goals: to better define and shape Pulaski Park; to make use of the southern edge of the park; to create a building that complements the existing urban fabric of downtown; and to expand the existing bike network.

While the tone at Tuesday's forum was more cordial than meetings surrounding plans for a Hilton Garden Inn and most were pleased that the process is more inclusive, some expressed a desire for a "bigger picture" view.

David Drake, of 321 Locust St., expressed concern that the discussion quickly moved into specific plans for the site, rather than a more comprehensive look that incorporates a bevy of ideas, including use of the old Mill River riverbed nearby, bike paths and possible relocation of Route 66.

"I see us quickly moving into a discussion of, 'well, this building will be better than the hotel so let's move in this direction,' when in fact we should probably be looking at a more comprehensive discussion," said Drake, who is chairman of the city's Historical Commission.

Architect Tristram Metcalfe said city officials should consider making the site the center of a much larger effort to connect a variety of elements downtown.

"This could be the heart of Northampton in a way that will bring people to Northampton," he said. "We could just put a building on that site and suck as much money out as we can ... but what it needs to do is to bring people to downtown."

Several people wanted the site to remain publicly owned, with some calling for an expanded Pulaski Park that would include more activities for community members such as an ice rink and amphitheater.

Frances Volkmann, a former city councilor, said she liked the basis of the plan, but she floated an idea that involved moving the buildings so as to extend Pulaski Park south and free up space for a "true town common."

"We have once chance now to get it right," Volkmann said.

Others said the site when developed would be a boon to the city's tax rolls. And some liked the idea of more housing downtown, while saying affordable housing should not be overlooked.

Love emphasized that the points residents brought up Tuesday will all need to be considered should the city move ahead in seeking a developer. He also cautioned that it's important to craft a proposal that not only meets the city's needs but also is financially feasible enough to attract a developer.

A member of the advisory committee, Julie Cowan, reminded people that the city is not under the gun to make quick decisions and it does not intend to do so.

"We want to do it right," Cowan said. "We want it to be comprehensive. We want it to be open because it is a jewel."

Another public forum is likely to be held later this fall.

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