

## Arena, nightclubs among new Waterside proposals

### NORFOLK

City Manager Marcus Jones briefed the City Council on five proposed redevelopment plans for Waterside Tuesday night, but he provided so few financial details that some council members expressed frustration.

Jones had Assistant City Manager Stanley A. Stein provide a brief overview of the five proposals. When pressed by some council members, Jones declined to say how much investors proposed spending or how much public money would be required.

Mayor Paul Fraim and Councilman Barclay C. Winn asked Jones to give further financial information, including what developers have proposed that the city pay.

"This needs to be as transparent as possible," Fraim said.

But Jones said he did not want to hurt the city's negotiating position with any of the developers, a sentiment echoed by Vice Mayor Anthony L. Burfoot.

The most ambitious of the five proposals could be the least likely to occur.

Drakkar America proposed building a 22,000-seat arena on the downtown waterfront as the home for a National Basketball Association team.

The company proposed tearing down Waterside and the Sheraton Norfolk Waterside Hotel to make room for a new arena. How the arena would be paid for remains unclear. Drakkar America made a similar offer to Virginia Beach that city officials there rejected last year partly because of the lack of development experience by Drakkar America.

Kevin Murphy, who heads the Downtown Norfolk Civic League, said the NBA arena proposal "should be dead on arrival" because it is the least realistic.

In addition to the arena, the proposals include:

- Alvin James Development Group would build an entertainment complex it would call Project Neptune III. It would include a 150-room hotel, nightclubs and movie theaters, including an IMAX theater. It would be a "green development" and would retain the current Waterside building.

Waterside would be transformed into three large nightclubs, including a private club, as well as some restaurants.

- The Cordish Companies of Baltimore would do a \$30 million makeover of Waterside that would bring 13 themed restaurants to the facility. It proposes taking over operation of Waterside, which it would rename Waterside Live. The building would be surrounded with neon and search lights. Stein said the company envisions retaining some of the current restaurants at Waterside.

- Harvey Lindsay Development of Norfolk proposed a \$200 million makeover of the waterfront that would include construction of a conference center, two new hotels, an office tower, a signature seafood waterfront restaurant and an expansion of the marina. Waterside would be torn down to make way for a \$65 million conference center, a facility the city has been seeking for nearly a decade. The proposal includes an elevated walkway that would connect the waterfront across Waterside Drive and Main Street to Plume Street.

- Virginia Beach businessman John X. Aragona proposed a \$5 million makeover of Waterside that would transform it into a "beach music" center that would host nightly concerts, many which would be televised. The proposal would retain the current building and would include restaurants with beach-music themes.

More than 50 community leaders and development officials tried to crowd into the council's informal chambers, with some, including Murphy, the downtown civic league leader, being forced to watch the presentation on a big-screen TV in another room.

He said he was most impressed with the proposal from The Cordish Companies.

"It's probably the proposal that would be most successful," he said. Still, he worries whether adding so many new restaurants downtown would hurt the eateries on Granby Street.

Burfoot said the Cordish development meets all of the goals of the city - retaining the Waterside building, keeping the space open to the public and relieving the city of the financial burden by turning Waterside over to a private developer.

"But we don't know what the numbers are," he said. "Until we know the numbers, we don't know if it will work."

Developed in 1983 as a festival marketplace, Waterside helped spark a revival of downtown. However, it is more than half empty and city officials acknowledge it is in need of repair. The city has been considering how to redevelop Waterside for three years.

The sports idea is not the first to surface. Fraim led an effort in 2001 to lure the NBA's Charlotte Hornets to Norfolk. The Hornets instead moved to New Orleans. Hampton Roads and Las Vegas are the largest metropolitan areas in the nation without a major sports team.

Jones said he will come back to the council in a month or two with a recommendation and more financial details. He has formed a seven-member committee to evaluate the proposals. He has also proposed hiring a consultant to help him evaluate the financing plans of the five options.

"The community loves this location," Fraim said. "We have to be careful in what we put there."

*Harry Minium, 757-446-2371, [harry.minium@pilotonline.com](mailto:harry.minium@pilotonline.com) [1]*

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