

# A year later, Norfolk officials close to Waterside deal

## NORFOLK

After months of delay, city officials say they are close to reaching a deal with the Baltimore developer who has promised to help bring downtown's Waterside back to life.

It has been nearly a year since the city was to initiate negotiations with The Cordish Cos., and some council members have expressed fear that the firm could back out because Norfolk has moved too slowly.

But other city leaders say that's not the case. A vote on Cordish's proposal could come within weeks, Mayor Paul Fraim said Friday.

City Attorney Bernard Pishko said in an email that "an agreement is probable relatively soon."

"Discussions have moved to relatively smaller matters," he said.

Said the city's spokeswoman, Lori Crouch: "It's more done than not done. We're tidying up."

For years, Norfolk has hoped to revive Waterside, a once-popular stretch of development along downtown's waterfront that has struggled to stay relevant. The city asked developers in 2011 to submit proposals for remaking the area. About a year ago, City Manager Marcus Jones selected Cordish's plan as the best.

Waterside Live, as the revamped waterfront would be called, would involve a major renovation, a new concert venue, new restaurants and a \$30 million investment by Cordish. The company would sign a decades-long lease agreement with the city and share in the tax revenue.

In June, the City Council directed Jones to begin talks with Cordish, expecting a quick turnaround. Cordish said at the time that such negotiations usually last a couple of months, and it urged the city to move fast. Calls to the company for this story weren't returned.

This month's vote to approve a new downtown hotel-conference center has only heightened the sense of urgency among council members; the projects are blocks apart and seen as vital to each other's success. The day the City Council voted on the hotel-conference center, April 9, Councilman Tommy Smigiel pressed Jones for an update on progress with Cordish.

"In a perfect world, we were trying to get to closure as early as tonight on both deals," Jones responded. "We're working diligently to try to bring something to you in April."

In recent interviews, city officials declined to say whether Jones is on track to deliver this month. They wouldn't discuss exactly what has caused the negotiations to drag on, but they offered a rough timeline and reassurances that Cordish isn't going away.

“I can say that real progress has been made,” Fraim said. “We’re close.”

Once an agreement is finished, Jones will present the details to the council, which will hold a public hearing and then vote on Cordish’s plan.

“We’re all waiting with bated breath,” said Councilman Paul Riddick.

*Pilot writer Jillian Nolin contributed to this report.*

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