

Master plan looks at ongoing, future development of Canal District

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LAWRENCE — A performing arts center, hiking and biking trails, and enhanced "gateways" into the city are just a few of the recommendations included in a new master plan for the Canal District.

About 30 local business and municipal leaders gathered at the 50 Island St. mill owned by Chet and Gary Siddell recently to listen to a presentation on the plan, prepared for the city and MassDevelopment, a state-backed agency that finances private and public projects.

Many of those at the meeting were impressed by the breadth and scope of the plan, but wondered what the next step would be and who would be taking it.

"The architect and consultant did a lot of research," said Gary Siddell, whose property falls within the Canal District. "But what happens now? How do we keep it going? Where do you start? What's the priority?"

The master plan attempts to highlight some of the continuing successes and future opportunities within the Canal District, deemed by city and state officials as critical to the city's renaissance.

The area encompasses both sides of the river, from Interstate 495 to the Great Stone Dam. On the south side of the river, it includes property along Merrimack Street, from Sal Lupoli's Riverwalk complex west to the South Canal International Business Center owned by Art McCabe.

On the north side of the river, the zone under consideration includes riverfront property from I-495, including the 25 Marston St. warehouse being renovated by Juan and Luis Yopez, west to Pemberton Park, a city-owned green space and parking lot. Farther inland from the river, the master plan looks at traffic flow on Essex Street and surrounding feeder streets.

Richard Henderson, vice president for real estate and planning at MassDevelopment, said the city asked his agency to create the document "so that individual projects aren't happening in a vacuum."

MassDevelopment, which paid \$100,000 for the master plan, said the document is now in the hands of the city to mull over and decide whether to implement aspects of the plan.

Acting Community Development Director Tom Schiavone said MassDevelopment will incorporate comments by stakeholders, and then city officials "will have a strategy session with the public to implement suggestions to the master plan."

He said the document could also be used as a marketing tool to lure developers to the city who may be looking for relatively inexpensive real estate opportunities.

Some of the property owners at the meeting were bullish on some of the ideas brought forward.

"They mentioned a lot of things, like fixing the bridges over the Merrimack, putting lights and banners on them so as you head into the city you feel like you're going into a renovated area," said Juan Yepez, who with his brother Luis owns the old Plymouth Mill at 25 Marston St. as well as the old Levis Paper Mill building on Canal Street.

The plan mentions the lack of downtown parking, something Yepez hopes is resolved.

It also discusses using Methuen Street as a corridor for trucks and other service vehicles loading and unloading products for sale in stores along Essex and Canal streets, something Yepez thinks is a good idea.

"Now, deliveries are holding up traffic on Essex Street," he said.

Alida Davis, property manager for the Pacific Mills complex on Canal Street, applauded the idea of sprucing up the bridges entering that part of the city.

But she opposes the idea of building a waterfront performing arts center at Pemberton Park, since traditionally the huge parking lot at that location has been used by employees at Pacific Mills.

Schiavone said the idea for a performing arts center came from state Rep. William Lantigua, D-Lawrence, who has been pushing for a Hatch Shell type of stage in what is normally an underused park.

Heather McMann, a project manager with Groundwork Lawrence, liked the idea of extending the Appleton Street pedestrian mall from City Hall to the North Canal. Groundwork's Farmers Market is at the pedestrian mall and would benefit from a larger area for people to walk in the city.

"That's a great idea," she said, adding that she was also happy the developers of the plan included a full river walk — on both sides of the river from I-495 to the Great Stone Dam.

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