

Consultants praise city's assets

By Steve Vied, Messenger-Inquirer

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Creating a successful downtown events center and re-establishing Owensboro as a destination for conventions, meetings and shows are big challenges, but consulting firms hired to assist a local steering committee planning the events center say the community has unique assets on its side.

"The good news is, Owensboro is relatively close to major markets," CityVisions managing partner Barry Alberts told the steering committee last week. "Having a facility would certainly attract those people. But they have their own facilities. Owensboro's needs to be very specific and distinct. Other than Evansville, you have a market that we feel certain facilities are missing."

CityVisions of Louisville and ConsultEcon Inc. of Boston were hired to assist the steering committee throughout the process of planning what the convention and events center should look like, how large it should be, what it should offer and what kinds of events it should try to attract.

Alberts and Bob Brais of ConsultEcon agree that the events center should not include a traditional sports arena. The center will do better to concentrate on conventions, trade shows, business conferences, consumer shows, music and entertainment shows, community events and smaller athletic events, they say.

What came across strongly in the consultants' draft feasibility study for the events center was that its proposed location close to the Ohio River and its proximity to other elements of the downtown revitalization project -- an expanded Smothers Park, revamped Veterans Boulevard with shops and restaurants and the block that will be called Riverfront Crossing -- raise its prospects for success.

"Owensboro can create a facility that differentiates it from alternative facilities in Kentucky and the Ohio River valley," Alberts said. "Owensboro had a market for meetings and events before the Executive Inn closed. A new facility will offer a much better setting than the Executive Inn. An events center will certainly provide superior river views."

A superior facility for meetings and events, tied to the river and nearby amenities now under construction, can create the sought after "preferred destination" label for downtown Owensboro, Alberts said.

"The setting you have here is a remarkable asset," he said. "The river view is highly marketable. Ballroom space will have huge use, with great views and do good business for the events center and be an important community asset. They become the most desirable places to have events."

Alberts had a warning for the committee, however. The convention and events center, and the way it is run, must impress visitors because they won't come back after a bad experience.

"Rebuilding the stream of meetings and events business in Owensboro and establishing a distinctive and high-quality reputation requires a distinctive meeting experience," he said.

CityVisions and ConsultEcon studied events centers in Frankfort, Dubuque, Iowa, Hampton Roads, Va., Paducah, Rochester, Minn., Dalton, Ga., Murray, Sioux City, Iowa, Bowling Green, St. Cloud, Minn., Evansville, Wildwood, N.J., Wilmington, N.C., and St. George, Utah. The smallest was Bowling Green's convention center (60,000 total square feet), and the largest was the NorthWest Georgia Trade & Convention Center in Dalton. Metro populations ranged from 92,700 in Dubuque to 347,000 in Wilmington. Some of the centers had outdoor spaces, and many take advantage of natural or special settings.

It will be up to the steering committee to decide how big to build the events center, but the consultants made a strong case for building it closer to the optimal size of 138,350 square feet, even though the minimum size of just under 100,000 square feet will meet the basic requirements. The smaller center carries a cost of \$25 million at \$250 per square foot in construction costs. The larger center will cost closer to \$34 million or \$35 million.

Income projections for the larger center include \$95,000 as a share of ticket sales, \$711,000 in rental fees, \$374,000 in contract services and other fees, \$671,000 in concessions, catering and merchandise, and \$50,000 in advertising fees.

Last week, Owensboro Mayor Ron Payne said the center may be built at a size between the minimal and optimal options offered by the consultants. He said the city may be willing to spend more than the \$7 million it has dedicated to the project.

"We've got to do it right," Payne said. "We may have to spend more dollars up front."

The next meeting of the steering committee is at 9 a.m. June 9 at the Daviess County Courthouse.

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