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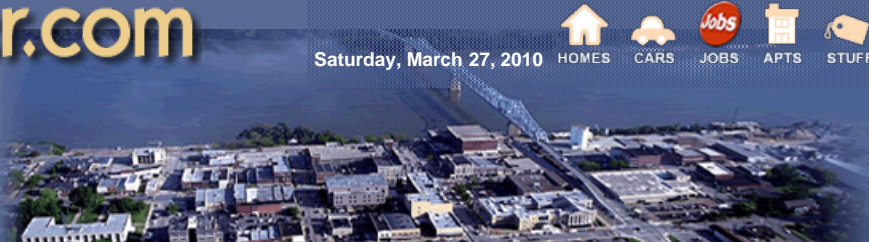
Saturday, March 27, 2010



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State office building still top priority

By the Messenger-Inquirer

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Once again, local officials find themselves facing criticism that could have been avoided by keeping the public in the loop. The public is providing the bulk of the \$150 million for downtown projects and deserves to share in all of the information about how that money is being spent and how the downtown plan is being implemented.

The news this week that the state office building has soil contamination issues that could cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to deal with wouldn't have brought so much outcry had the public been informed each step of the way. Since at least December, the city has known about the property's soil contamination issues, but until this week the public had been kept in the dark about these environmental issues.

It's time for local officials to opt for inundating the public with information and details about each step of the process downtown instead of leaving those details sparse and incomplete. Communication continues to be a weak spot for those heading downtown revitalization.

That said, the potential cost of the cleanup shouldn't derail plans to build the hotel and indoor events center at the site. Officials and planners are correct that locating this project at the state office building site is "paramount," and that hasn't changed.

Had the public been informed of the environmental issues in December, the news of increasing contamination levels at the property this year wouldn't have been as surprising. State officials said the levels are still low, and the city is now conducting further testing that will give officials a better sense of the extent of the problem and what it will cost to clean up the site.

With the real estate deal now on hold, the city has the responsibility to begin negotiating a new deal with the state to help offset the increased costs that are likely to come with this uptick in soil contamination. Mayor Ron Payne said that work has already begun, and he hopes to have a meeting scheduled with Gov. Steve Beshear in the near future. By mid-May, the results of further environmental study of the site will be known and should factor into those negotiations.

This is another chance for the state to step up and commit its support to the project. The state should find a way to become a partner in the project rather than simply a real estate agent.

Re-orienting the hotel and events center on the site is an option that the city is considering, and is one that could ease the impact of these environmental issues without altering the intent and goals of the downtown plan. Using the state office

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building as the site for the events center, which will be owned by the city, might make a cost-free transfer of the property to the city possible, since the property won't be going into private hands.

The ordinance the City Commission will vote on Monday offers assurances that the city will keep working to obtain the property. The agreement to purchase the property is only repealed if the state refuses to postpone the closing date so the further environmental study can be done. The ordinance states that it's still the city's desire to "revitalize the State Office Building property" as part of the downtown plan.

Other comments are less reassuring, such as Downtown Development Director Fred Reeves saying the downtown master plan can move forward with the hotel and events center at another site, or City Commissioner John Kazlauskas saying the plan could change or be made better if this site isn't available.

"They (city officials) will take the downtown plan forward," Reeves said Thursday. "We will look at other available properties and locations that will work."

If those projects can't be placed at West Second and Frederica streets, the next option is not to look for the second-best site. The next option is to abandon the downtown plan that's been adopted and start over.

This was the site selected by planners and sold as a centerpiece for the downtown plan. Without these projects at that corner, there is no plan.

Placing these signature projects on this prominent corner in downtown is that critical -- to the fulfillment of the promise of this downtown master plan, and to the ongoing support from this newspaper and others who have backed revitalization efforts.

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Reader Comments

The following are comments from the readers. In no way do they represent the view of www.messenger-inquirer.com.

When wrote on Mar 27, 2010 12:46 AM:

" Kudos to the Messenger for coming out and saying when their opinion will be changed, when the city site is moved.

More importantly, when will someone go back and look at how many times the public can be told one thing and then told another later in the process and no one discuss the change?

Your editorial now calls this a \$150 million project. Your previous reporting said it was a \$40 million project, then \$79 and occassionally a \$120 million and today it's \$150 million. This goes along with whatever the Mayor or Fred Reeves says the number is today.

In truth the City of Owensboro was told a \$40 million dollar project originally was going to build a marina, riverwalk, finish out the stabilization project and handle all aspects of the downtown project. In fact in these pages, they were lauded in basically to help transform this community.

But then a new Mayor and new plan came to be born. Suddenly an additional \$79 million was needed to transform and reinvorgate downtown (what changed in the Messengers opinion in those short few years that the \$40 million wouldn't transform and be paramount to downtowns success) Regardless the \$79 million is out there, and now it's for some reason it's \$150 million. Maybe my math is wrong but \$79 plus \$40 million plus the \$20 million for the hotel is not \$150 million. Yes the city added \$2 million at one point, but that can only be added for cost overruns on the \$40 million originally which you reported on.

So now we are at \$150 million (if we use your math) There is no Riverwalk, there is no Marina, there is no Executive Inn, but there will be a replacement for it, along with a soil erosion project, fountain and new boat ramp. Should this be what \$150 million buys?

The numbers and the priorities change constantly, sometimes even monthly and this week, daily based upon what they (local officials) can and can't get passed. And for you, those who are supposed to be the those who are steward of our public records (the media in general) the forgetfulness of our past is very obvious.

Yes plans may change and modifications may be necessary, but to allow this type of continued pervasion to those in Owensboro and Daviess to occur, without at a minimum calling out the past falsehoods only continues to allow those of the public to question your motives and the validity of your future arguements.

Speak the truth and more importantly, use the words you have of the past, both in reporting and on the editorial page to remind readers of the promises made and the promsies broken. "

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Pardonme wrote on Mar 27, 2010 8:49 AM:

" It's time for local officials to opt for inundating the public with information and details about each step of the process downtown instead of leaving those details sparse and incomplete."

Give me one good reason why we should believe anything these people have to say. They have hidden and obfuscated the truth to a level that no one should be subjected to, especially the taxpayers who are paying the bill. The gang who can't shoot straight can not be trusted and without trust there is nothing. I wish payne would get on his buffalo and ride out of town, we would all be better off. "

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Slayer of the Myth wrote on Mar 27, 2010 9:00 AM:

" Amazing that the M & I still supports this. This project is WAY over budget and they haven't even gotten into the nuts and bolts of it yet.

I just don't understand how our paper can stand by and look at the abuse of our tax payer funds.

\$150,000,000.00 and only \$20,000,000 in private investment? It should be the other way. Come on M & I wake up - read the studies of Hotel/Convention center cities. It's not good. Look at your front page - River Park can't make it's debt payment - this is an all to familiar site. In another economic times - maybe - 10.6% unemployment - taxing citizens to death - both locally, state and federally. "

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Oburger wrote on Mar 27, 2010 12:36 PM:

" The final three graphs of the editorial say precisely what must be said: follow the plan or redo it.

For supporters of downtown, who have long sought its revitalization, the creation and adoption of the placemaking master plan was like the stars aligning. Public involvement was extensive and community buy-in unprecedented. Supporters continue to defend the plan as naysayers denigrate it.

Any significant deviation from the adopted plan, such as changing the site for the core hotel and events center, demands proper amendment of the plan. The same groups who were originally involved must be brought back together: urban planners and designers, stakeholders, and the public at large.

Ignoring the adopted plan disrespects the people and process that brought it into being and risks bad decisions that are not supported. Let us not ruin the exciting prospects for a revitalized downtown. Follow the plan or redo it! "

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ItsMyOpinion wrote on Mar 27, 2010 1:46 PM:

" Can someone tell me exactly how they plan on fitting a hotel/convention center/rec plex on the state office building site? It's just not big enough! I mean seriously, they're going to build a small hotel, and a small convention center and this is going to SAVE OWENSBORO....can I sell someone a big blue bridge? "

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Idea wrote on Mar 27, 2010 10:11 PM:

" Here's an idea.....oust Johnson, Kazlaskas and that "Payne" in our wallets. "

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BigO wrote on Mar 27, 2010 11:02 PM:

" The M-I delivers another weak, mildly critical, middle of the road editorial. You guys are definitely out of touch- and how's those circulation numbers going? Get out of the office every once in a while. "

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