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### Planning process for Big E property is under way

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By Steve Vied, Messenger-Inquirer

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A seasonal marina. An amphitheater in conjunction with the relocation of the International Bluegrass Music Museum. A riverfront restaurant. An urban residential neighborhood. A baseball stadium. A riverfront park.

Those are some of the possibilities being bandied about for the 17-acre Executive Inn Rivermont property, which is now owned by the city of Owensboro. But whatever is developed on the prime piece of riverfront acreage, it must complement and support, not be independent of or compete with the rest of the downtown revitalization project.

That is the course Gateway Planning Group officials are following as they begin to develop concepts for the hotel property. Gateway of Fort Worth, Texas, is the firm that designed the master plan for revamping a large area of downtown Owensboro, a project that carries a price tag of almost \$80 million.

"The bottom line goal is, we have to refine the master plan adopted by the (city and county) commissions to take advantage of the Executive Inn site," said Scott Polikov, Gateway's president. "We're delving into many aspects of what could happen there, for the next five years and for the next generation. We hope to balance near-term opportunities with much farther out."

The downtown master plan was written before the city acquired the Executive Inn, but Gateway planners always anticipated that the riverfront property would eventually become part of the overall downtown scheme, Polikov said. The firm is now in the early stages of coming up with a plan for the site. On Thursday and Friday, Polikov and Gateway planner Mike Huston were meeting with focus groups in Owensboro to gather ideas and opinions about the property.

Most likely, a combination of uses and attractions will prove best for the site, Polikov said.

"We've heard the YMCA is looking for a new place, and the city and county want to expand recreation," he said. "There's a need (to give) sports tourism kids something to do."

The ultimate goal for the Executive Inn site is the same as for the entire downtown master plan, Polikov said. That goal is getting people downtown and giving them a reason to stay.

"How will what we do turn into more restaurants and more people living downtown and more music venues?" he asked. "The process is to figure out what needs to be there and update the master plan. We need to know what people like, what the private sector is willing to invest in and what the public will support. ... Whatever we do on that 17 acres has to support the rest."

Downtown Development Director Fred Reeves said, "This is an opportunity to enrich the master plan we've adopted."

One of the focus group meetings involved people with boating interests. Jim Tyler, Terry Schrecker, Larry Maglinger and Ron Kolb were all enthusiastic about the idea of putting a seasonal courtesy or transient dock on the Ohio River at the hotel site that would allow visiting boaters to tie up their boats and walk into the downtown area to eat, shop or attend entertainment events.

"It would bring boaters from Louisville and Evansville for a day or a weekend," Maglinger said. "The Executive Inn site would be ideal."

Kolb, who has moved the former Executive Inn's marina downstream to near Triad Drive and is operating it there, agreed that a courtesy dock at the hotel site would be good for the city. He said the site shouldn't be used for a full-scale, permanent inland marina because it would too expensive and require the use of the entire 17 acres.

Earlier this month, the Owensboro City Commission discussed funding a \$66,000 marina study that would take a look at building either a permanent inland marina at English Park or a floating seasonal marina at the Executive Inn property. At that time, commissioners asked City Manager Bill Parrish to seek input on the idea from the Gateway Planning Group.

Reeves said public meetings will be held in coming months on possible uses of the Executive Inn property.

Steve Vied, 691-7297, [svied@messenger-inquirer.com](mailto:svied@messenger-inquirer.com)

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