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Group says mixed use best for Executive Inn property

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By Steve Vied, Messenger-Inquirer

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Given three distinct options for the use of the former Executive Inn Rivermont property, participants at a forum Saturday overwhelmingly favored a combination of the three designs.

Sponsored by the We the People organization and the Public Life Foundation, the workshop at the Sportscenter attracted more than 100 people who spent the morning considering the three basic design options offered by the Gateway Planning Group for the city-owned property, along with a long list of individual projects. Participants were also invited to suggest additional ideas, and many of them did.

In the end, the great majority of the people -- 74 of the 127 who voted -- favored some combination of the three options, which were "Public Assembly and Tourism," "Residential-Urban Village Development" and "Community Recreation."

Of those three options, the design that leaned heavily toward residential use of the property, such as condos and townhouses, fared the worst, with only seven people choosing it.

Thirty-three people liked the public/tourism option, which included an outdoor events center that could be used for baseball, other sporting events and concerts, a covered amphitheater and a large restaurant.

Thirteen people selected the community recreation concept, which consisted of a lot of open park-like green space and such amenities as an aquatics center, boat dock and IMAX theater but few other structures.

The most popular single feature, and one that was included on all three options, was an enhanced farmers market, which garnered 69 votes, followed by walking paths and bike trails (48 votes) and an amphitheater (47 votes). Thirty-five people liked the idea of an outdoor events center, and 35 liked a mix of restaurants. The next most popular idea, with 28 votes, was a boat dock and an area for kayaks and canoes.

Downtown Development Director Fred Reeves said he was not surprised that the group selected the combination option.

"We fully anticipated that people would want a mix," he said. "But this allowed them to talk about the various options."

Reeves said he was a little surprised at the lack of support for a residential component.

"I don't know if it wasn't explained well, or people just value that land for public use," he said. "Of course, this was one snapshot for one day. It's valuable information, but we'll be talking to other groups."

The popularity of moving the farmers market to the Big E property also was not a surprise, Reeves said, possibly because it has been talked a lot about lately. The outcome confirms that a farmers market is recognized as a good use of the property, he said.

Ideas offered by participants included setting aside property for future hotels, a walk of fame featuring prominent local individuals, selling English Park to private developers, a dog park, a micro brewery, a full-service marina and moving the International Bluegrass Music Museum to the property. Participant Carl Ringwald called for little or no residential use of the property and putting the proposed hotel and convention center on the property.

Brescia University student Lara Hager expressed support for the outdoor events center but wasn't as excited about a farmers market. "Musical events would draw more people than a farmers market," she said. "Baseball, who wouldn't want to go to that?"

All four members of Daviess Fiscal Court attended the workshop, and four of five members of the City

Commission were on hand.

The city of Owensboro bought the Executive Inn and 17 acres of prime riverfront land in March for \$5 million. Daviess Fiscal Court paid \$2.23 million in August for 3.7 acres that were once part of the hotel's property. Demolition of the old hotel is scheduled to begin this week.

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