

Recommendations of the 415 W. Washington Proposal Review Committee

The 415 W. Washington Proposal Review Committee has been charged with evaluating the proposals submitted in response to RFP 695 for the acquisition and redevelopment of the City-owned property at 415 W. Washington.

The Committee has reviewed the three proposals received by the City and evaluated them in relationship to the site objectives and requirements contained in the Request for Proposals.

The Committee was impressed with the creativity and thoughtfulness of all three proposals, including the additional materials and information the teams were asked to provide. Highlights of the proposals include:

- The Ann Arbor Art Center proposes to renovate the existing buildings on the site for arts and cultural uses, including artist studio lease space. In addition to providing an opportunity for this established organization to consolidate its activities into a single location, the site would provide a community festival/gathering space in the courtyard area framed by the buildings.
- The Morningside Group would add 52 residential and artist live/work units to the site in a new LEED Gold-certified building, while marketing and renovating the 415 W. Washington building for a community use. As the developers of nearby Liberty Lofts, the team offers a successful track record of historic preservation and sensitive infill development.
- The Old West Side Design Group proposal would create 24-26 residential units, including artist live/work and affordable units, on the 415 W. Washington site. The proposal also would incorporate the adjoining carwash site on Liberty to add 24 residential units and commercial use. Access is proposed from both Liberty and Washington through a pedestrian-oriented “social street” with future connections to a potential train platform.

All of the proposals identify the floodway portion of the site as a greenway, incorporate elements of flood risk mitigation and stormwater management and include uses that would be beneficial to the neighborhood and larger community.

Notwithstanding these positive elements, the Committee finds that no single proposal is able to satisfy all of the site objectives and requirements of the RFP on its own merits. This evaluation is described in the findings below, followed by recommendations for the next steps in the site redevelopment process.

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Findings

In reviewing the proposals, the Committee made the following findings:

- Preservation of floodways as open space in public ownership or control is considered a best management practice for flood risk mitigation, and none of the proposals would be negatively impacted by retaining the floodway portion of the site in public ownership.
- The main 415 W. Washington office building could be and should be preserved and renovated for a community-based use. However, the City has no interest in retaining oversight or management of this or other buildings on the site.
- Residential use is a desirable element of the site, because it provides eyes on the greenway and enhances revenue opportunities for the City, while fully utilizing the site area outside of the floodway.
- Without some type of infill development, the site will not generate revenue for the City.
- The garage structures are likely to be designated as “contributing resources” in the resurvey of the Old West Side historic district, currently in progress. However, the addition of a residential building at the southwest corner of the site is more desirable to the neighborhood and the city than preserving the garage structures.
- Removal of the garage structures and replacement with a new structure would mitigate some of the flood risk that characterizes this site.
- The extent of the environmental contamination on the site presents an uncertainty for potential developers.
- Future uses of this site must be considered in finding a solution to congestion on Washington Street associated with YMCA activities.

Taking the site objectives of the RFP and the findings from its discussion, the Committee identified a more specific vision for the development of the site. The vision includes: retaining the floodway portion of the site in public ownership; renovating the 415 W. Washington office building for an arts and/or civic use; and removing the garages behind the office building and constructing a new multi-family or live-work residential infill development in their place at the southwest corner of the site.

In weighing each proposal against this revised vision for the site, the Committee concluded that no single proposal completely satisfies the site objectives.

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Recommendations

The Committee recommends that City Council consider the following actions as it determines the next steps for the 415 W. Washington site proposals:

1. City Council should further clarify its vision for the intended uses of the site and revise the site objectives in the RFP accordingly. The Committee recommends that City Council include the following elements in its vision for the site:
 - A publicly-owned greenway along the existing floodway
 - Renovation of the 415 W. Washington office building for an arts and/or civic use.
 - Removal of the garages behind the office building.
 - Construction of a new multi-family or live-work residential building at the southwest corner of the site
 - Pedestrian and vehicle connections to both Liberty and Washington Streets
2. City Council should provide each of the three proposers an opportunity to amend their proposal to respond to the revised site objectives and to provide for collaboration between the parties. The charge of the advisory committee should be extended to review the amended proposals and make its recommendation to City Council by March 16, 2009.
3. If City Council agrees that the floodway should be retained in public ownership, it should revise the RFP to request that proposers identify proposed parcel boundaries and access easements for the remaining development parcel.
4. City Council should authorize City staff to initiate discussions with the Downtown Development Authority and the Ann Arbor/Ypsilanti Smartzone to explore brownfield options for the site and with the YMCA to explore solutions to the current Washington Street traffic issues.

415 W. Washington Proposal Review Committee

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