

Opportunity for productive land use in Weybosset Hill renewal project

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Recent proposals submitted to the Providence Redevelopment Authority for the development of "parcel 4" in the Weybosset Hill Urban Renewal Project have raised some interesting ideas as to the best use of that site.

Located in LaSalle Square to the south of the Civic Center and west of the John E. Fogarty Memorial Building and currently in use as a parking lot, this prime one-acre site in the heart of the downtown will be a major source of tax revenue to the city once its development takes place. But the question is what type of development will be best for the city?

The Convention Center Committee, a group of downtown businessmen, has strongly urged that convention-oriented facilities, to include a hotel and banquet-exhibition hall, be built here. A study done for the Committee suggested several options to increase convention-type business, one of which stated that large-scale conventions, of the order of 1,000-2,000 delegates, would require the construction of a 350-room hotel, 30,000 square feet of banquet and exhibition space, and some minor changes to the Civic Center to create additional meeting rooms.

Although no such development proposals were submitted to the PRA at its July meeting, one developer has indicated he will submit a hotel-convention proposal before the July 31 deadline.

Three proposals were submitted to the PRA at this last meeting, two of which would construct a jewelry trade center in which jewelry showrooms would be made available to manufacturers. The 14-story building would also house a convention hall and retail shops.

The third proposal, to build subsidized housing for the elderly on this site, should be dismissed immediately. Elderly residents living in LaSalle Square would be constantly subjected to traffic and noise throughout the day and night. In addition, the 200 units for the elderly under construction at Cathedral Square will increase the housing stock to a level in which nearly two of every three units in the downtown will be occupied only by the elderly.

The decision to allow either a hotel or a jewelry trade center is based upon the major constraint of the small size of the site, yet a single, medium-rise building is being proposed rather than a high-rise, so as not to be out of scale with the

surrounding buildings. If the site were larger and more floor space available, it would be possible to have a total package, including a hotel-trade center-convention complex in this prime location.

How can one increase floor space without a taller building? The answer lies in utilizing the adjoining John E. Fogarty Memorial Building, i.e., the "Welfare Building", as part of the development.

The three-story Fogarty Building nearly covers its entire 25,000 square foot site, and was built in such a way that another level could be added to the building. This potential 100,000 square feet of space on four levels also has space for storage and a 32-car parking garage under the building.

Both jewelry trade center proposals suggest up to 96,000 square feet of required show space, the amount potentially available in the Fogarty. Another possible use of this architecturally pleasing building would be as a banquet-exhibit facility devoted entirely to this purpose. The point here is that the Fogarty Building offers an opportunity for integration into the proposed development of parcel 4.

The 10-year-old Fogarty building was built and is owned by the city of Providence. If integrated into the parcel 4 complex, the building could remain in city hands and be rented out for conventions and special events linked to the hotel-jewelry center. Ownership of the Fogarty by the city and the privately developed and owned hotel-jewelry center would follow exactly the study recommendations to the Convention Center Committee that "it is in the best interests of the (convention) industry and the City to ensure that no one entity has exclusive control over the Center."

The one remaining piece in this puzzle is the state Social and Rehabilitative Services agency which presently occupies the entire Fogarty Building. What happens to them?

The state requires that Providence provide a facility from which SRS can supply its services. The city-owned Fogarty houses many of these services; is central to nearby SRS offices; and is accessible by bus. Providence provides this rent-free facility to SRS and the state reimburses the city for maintenance of the building. So the question is where can offices in the downtown be located for SRS?

There are several possibilities. One is that space be provided in the new federal building to be constructed in the downtown. Another is that a new building be constructed. The bonding necessary for a new building could be paid off by the

increased taxes on the parcel 4 development.

Perhaps the best possibility lies in the reuse of old buildings that could be rehabilitated into needed offices. Such buildings as the Misch on Empire Street or some other available structure might be possibilities.

It may not be easy to pull all these pieces together, but the end result could be a convention-hotel-jewelry trade complex that would be a people activity center, both day and night, upgrade the retailing in the Fountain Street area, generate new taxes for the city, and be a major industry for the Providence downtown.

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July 25 1978