

## Senior housing tower looking at makeover

*Austin Geriatric Center board set to hire firm to create plan for building, land.*

By **Shonda Novak**

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Published: 11:39 p.m. Monday, April 12, 2010

Nearly 18 acres north of Lady Bird Lake that house the 16-story Rebekah Baines Johnson apartments for low-income senior citizens are being slated for redevelopment, in what could become one of the larger new projects east of Interstate 35.

The board of Austin Geriatric Center Inc., which oversees the apartment building, is expected to vote today to authorize negotiations on a contract with HS&A, an Austin-based project management firm, to create a vision for transforming the 17.8 acres.

The board intends to expand the amount of low-income housing for elderly people on the site, as well as provide services such as a grocery, food service-restaurant, skilled nursing facilities, a health clinic, a pharmacy and exercise facilities.

Plans could also include housing for a broader-income mix of residents and other uses consistent with the mission of the Austin Geriatric Center and the surrounding neighborhood, several board members said.

The site is north of Festival Beach between Waller and Comal streets, and south of Haskell Street.

Clarke Heidrick, chairman of the nonprofit's board, said the 250-unit apartment building may remain and be renovated. It is structurally sound, although it needs updating, including a sprinkler system to meet current city fire codes. Heidrick said it's possible a second residential building could be constructed.

Art Dilly, who has been on the board since the early 1980s, said other possibilities include building assisted-living and skilled nursing facilities.

Such additions would fulfill the original vision for the center, set forth in the 1960s by President Lyndon B. Johnson for a place in Austin "for the elderly sick and the elderly well," Dilly said.

The apartment building, which opened in 1972, is named after Johnson's mother.

### Housing needs

The mortgage on the property will be paid off in 2013; that prospect was a catalyst for the board to evaluate plans for the site. Heidrick stressed that the board is at the very early stages of its planning.

"There is no specific plan or outcome that we are committed to, other than to consider what is best for our residents, the neighborhood and the land itself," Heidrick said.

The City of Austin owns about 8.5 contiguous acres that house a health center and emergency medical service headquarters.

Paul Saldaña, an Austin Geriatric Center board member, said the board has asked Council Member Mike Martinez and Mayor Lee Leffingwell "to potentially sponsor a council resolution" that would include the city land in the overall master plan. Martinez said that the site would offer "tremendous potential for some significant potential community benefits," adding that he is "certainly very interested" in continuing the

discussions.

"Our housing need for seniors is not going to go down; it will only increase in time," Martinez said. "And one of the biggest desires is to have centrally located affordable senior housing. If we can achieve consensus among the stakeholders, it would be a true tribute to President Johnson to fulfill the vision he had more than four decades ago."

Martinez said at this stage, there have been "no formal agreements, no commitments," noting that it will take "multiple parties to come to any development agreement."

Saldaña said the acreage offers "huge potential" for development.

David Stauch, president of HS&A, said the firm is "thrilled" to be a partner with the Austin Geriatric Center-Rebekah Baines Johnson board on the project.

"This landmark project will serve as a gateway to Austin from the south, while expanding low-income housing facilities for the elderly," Stauch said.

#### Planning team

Sabino Renteria, who is involved in planning issues in the East Cesar Chavez neighborhood, is one of three neighborhood representatives on an advisory board to the Austin Geriatric Center regarding the tract.

"I think it's wonderful that the board wants to work with our neighborhood planning team to come up with a mixed-use project that expands the number of affordable housing units and brings some small-scale retail that would serve the seniors and disabled people who live there as well as nearby residents," Renteria said.

Neighborhood residents would like a small grocery, he said, and private dental offices "might be a welcome addition."

"Some people have talked about creating a unique park with amenities to serve residents with multiple disabilities as part of the vision."

Renteria said he also is pleased the Austin Geriatric Center is considering more housing on the site to serve residents with a mix of incomes.

"As our neighborhood ages, we'd like to see more senior housing built, so we don't have to leave our neighborhood when it's time to give up our homesteads," Renteria said.

The HS&A team also includes Bury + Partners, a civil engineering firm, of which it is a subsidiary; Capitol Market Research, a local real estate consulting firm; the Drenner & Golden Stuart Wolff law firm; and Southwest Strategies.

snovak@statesman.com; 445-3856

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