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Rebekah Baines Johnson Center site seeks makeover

Master plan in works for prime land downtown

Premium content from Austin Business Journal - by Sandra Zaragoza, ABJ Staff

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The nonprofit that runs the Rebekah Baines Johnson Center, a residential tower for seniors and disabled people, has hired a local project management firm to develop a master plan for its 22-acre site east of I-35 along Lady Bird Lake.

The move comes as the nonprofit Austin Geriatric Center Inc. is getting a new executive director and will soon retire its 40-year mortgage. When it pays off its debt in 2013, leaders will be in a position to explore options for the site and the two buildings on it. Its planning envelope also includes roughly 8 adjacent city-owned acres.

The nonprofit's board, which hired Austin-based HS&A to do the master plan, wants to ensure the future of the RBJ Center's residents who call a 16-story, 250-unit residential tower home. The second tower is leased to Central Health, formerly called the Travis County Healthcare District, for its dental offices.

City, business and neighborhood leaders have been engaged in the planning process since it began earlier this year. There have been a handful of meetings so far, and more are planned for November.

Austin Geriatric Center Chairman **Clarke Heidrick**, a partner at law firm Graves Dougherty Hearon & Moody PC, said the board's priorities are to continue providing low-cost housing for existing residents, upgrading safety features and expanding low-income housing for the elderly who live on the site. The board would like to see complementary uses for the RBJ site, such as skilled nursing facilities, a restaurant, a neighborhood grocery store, a pharmacy and a fitness and recreational center.

Meanwhile, **Helen Varty** has been hired to replace Executive Director **Mike Nelson**, who is stepping down after leading the organization for 12 years. Varty, who starts Nov. 1, comes to Austin Geriatric Center after being executive director of Front Steps, the nonprofit that manages the Austin Resource Center for the Homeless.

Heidrick said Varty was the choice to lead the nonprofit because of her experience in housing.

"She's got a lot of experience on the social services end, at the [Austin Resource Center for the Homeless]. She's been in leadership roles with great success and works well with the city and other partners. We thought that she could take good care of the residents," Heidrick said.

Taking care of residents will be a priority, Varty said. The board has made clear that it intends to minimize disruption to residents. One possible scenario would be building housing and moving current residents into it while the tower is renovated.

"In essence, we are expanding our mission to provide more housing for the seniors and disabled in complementary ways that will benefit residents and, hopefully, generate some cash flow," Heidrick said.

Although the RBJ Center is on a visible piece of land bordering I-35, Heidrick said that won't influence the planning process.

"The driver is not the real estate. The driver is the mission to provide housing for low-income seniors and disabled people," he said.

The nonprofit — which is funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, rents, and Section 8 housing subsidies — has raised roughly \$150,000 in private funding to hire a planner and start the master-planning process.

Meanwhile, the Housing Authority of the City of Austin has set aside \$20,000 to help the nonprofit in its planning, Housing Authority CEO **Jim Hargrove** said.

Hargrove, who is a member of the RBJ Center planning committee, said the Housing Authority is interested in the center's progress and in expanding affordable housing.

"We have a wait list of 10,000 [families]. Anything that we can do to expand affordable housing, we are interested in," he said. "We also know the baby boomers are aging, and we have to start preparing now to make sure we have enough affordable housing."

The board expects that HS&A will present its master plan scenarios by 2011, but Heidrick said the board isn't in a rush.

"It [the planning process] is going to take a while, but we are going to give ourselves plenty of time to work through all of the issues and do long-term planning," Heidrick said.

The nonprofit would have to seek funding for any new construction projects, likely in the form of grants and individual donations. But there are no immediate plans to begin fundraising.

The challenges for master planning will be potential zoning issues, financial feasibility and getting support of the city and East Austin neighborhoods for potential development.

Sabino Renteria, president of the East Cesar Chavez Neighborhood Planning Team, said his group supports the gradual development of the area as long as it meets the planning criteria set up by the neighborhood committee.

"We support a mixed-use, but not high-density, development," Renteria said, adding that the group supports building height limitations and preserving the site's historic elements, such as a former fish hatchery just north of the towers.

Paul Saldaña, president of Brisa Communications and RBJ Center board member, said the board has made a point of bringing neighborhood and city leaders together with affordable-housing experts.

"We really want to bring the experiences and the expertise to help our board make good decisions," Saldaña said.

Walter Moreau, executive director of Foundation Communities who sits on the RBJ Center planning committee, said residents are eager to have more amenities available to them, such as a small grocer.

"I think it's wise for the RBJ organization to have a master planner because they need to think through not only market demand issues but zoning and setbacks along the water," Moreau said.

A skilled nursing facility would be a great addition to the complex that would enable independent-living residents to transition into assisted living, Saldaña said. A health clinic, a pharmacy and exercise facilities would also contribute to that end.

"Some of the tenants grew up in the neighborhood and have good, close friendships at RBJ Center," Saldaña said.

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