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Water park, hotel plan has critics

Public money, lack of overall concept jeered

By: **Bartley Kives**

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A travelling carnival is set up at The Forks Thursday. Critics wonder if a water park and hotel would detract from the image of the nearby Canadian Museum for Human Rights.

Winnipeg's plan to sell a prime parcel of downtown land to a water-park developer has raised more

concerns about the city's priorities, as well as the piecemeal development of the region around The Forks.

This morning, council's downtown and riverbank committee will consider a proposal to sell a Waterfront Drive surface lot known as Parcel Four to Alberta's Canalta hotel chain, which hopes to build a water park, hotel and parkade on the 2.2-hectare site. Canalta would pay \$6 million for the land and would receive a \$7-million city grant that would ensure \$700,000 worth of admission credits every year for the next 25 years.



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Councillor Paula Havixbeck

Mayor Sam Katz has championed the water-park plan and a majority of council appears on side. But support for the project is not unanimous, even among the mayor's inner circle.

Charleswood-Tuxedo Coun. Paula Havixbeck, who sits on executive policy committee, said she has yet to decide on supporting the proposal.

"Why can't the private sector come and do this on its own?" asked the council conservative, who said the city could use \$7 million to fund community centres, roads, bridges and major projects such as the widening of Kenaston Boulevard.



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Councillor Jeff Browaty

Parcel Four had been set aside by the city for future use by The Forks since the late 1990s, following the reconstruction of the Provencher Bridge and the realignment of William Stephenson Way. It was also reserved for future use by the Canadian Museum for Human Rights.

Jim August, CEO of The Forks North Portage Partnership, said the city is free to develop its own land as it sees fit, ideally with an eye to integrating the future use with The Forks and the human rights museum.

Some members of Winnipeg's real estate industry, however, are fuming over what they describe as a lack of access to the site, which was once sublet to the Winnipeg Goldeyes and is currently used as a City of Winnipeg parking lot.

"If that land was in play, why wouldn't they bring it into play for everyone? There are many, many things that would deliver greater value for that land," said one private-sector real estate expert.

"I'm very, very shocked a high-quality parcel of land is being dedicated to a water park when there are clearly better uses, like high-density residential or an office development. It was never available on the public market."

The city did not issue an expression-of-interest document for Parcel Four. The land became available in 2009 as part of the city's search for a water-park developer interested in receiving a \$7-million grant, said Barry Thorgrimson, Winnipeg's property director.

"We had the direction from council and I'm not going to second-guess it," he said.

He also said any speculation there may be a better use for Parcel Four is irrelevant. "Right now, what we

have is the bird in the hand."

That attitude is precisely the city's problem when it comes to developing the area around The Forks, said Richard Milgrom, the head of the University of Manitoba's city planning department.

"It seems to me there's still an open question of what we want The Forks to be. Just because there's an empty site, doesn't mean we put something on it. What is the plan?" he asked.

"That whole west side of Waterfront Drive is what greets you when you come from the other side of the (Red) River. It's what welcomes you into downtown. So how does a water park fit into making this a good place rather than just having another attraction?"

Even councillors who support the water-park proposal are concerned about how the design will fit in with both The Forks and the Antoine Predock-designed human rights museum.

"We're not ready to accept a standard highway motel here, right across from Esplanade Riel and the human rights museum," said council property director Jeff Browaty (North Kildonan), who intends to vote in favour of the water park and hotel complex.

St. Boniface Coun. Dan Vandal, who also supports the proposal, said Canalta's design must be "above a normal sort of hotel water park."

The Alberta-based chain, best known for rural Alberta and Saskatchewan hotels, has not built in a larger urban centre before, Thorgrimson said. But he said the city's urban design advisory committee will ensure the hotel and water park will complement the human rights museum and The Forks.

"We don't want this to be trumping anything. We want this to be an attractive, supporting development," he said.

The previous hotel plan for Parcel Four, a luxury development in the vein of a Wyndham property, might have made more sense for the area, said Doug Corbett, a principal at Winnipeg's Smith Carter Architects & Engineers.

The new hotel must coexist with Predock's human rights museum, which he describes as one of North America's most sophisticated buildings.

"This is not the Pembina Highway strip. A water park could be very distracting from the site," Corbett said. "Whatever you put there has to be thought out."

-- with files from Jen Skerritt

bartley.kives@freepress.mb.ca

How big will the water park be?

Splasher's of the South Seas in Grand Forks: 40,000 square feet.

Proposed Canalta water park in Winnipeg: 50,000 square feet.

World Water Park at West Edmonton Mall: 217,000 square feet.

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