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Convention centre tip of iceberg

Expansion just one part of revitalization near facility

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Winnipeg Convention Centre officials say the expansion to the facility is triple the investment that went into the MTS Centre.

The Winnipeg Convention Centre expansion could trigger the biggest downtown redevelopment project since the centre was first built 37 years ago.

WCC president and CEO Klaus Lahr said Wednesday the convention centre expansion will be part of a much larger downtown redevelopment project that will also include a 250-to-350-room hotel, a parkade, and hopefully, a residential development and an office and/or retail complex.

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Klaus Lahr: 'let's see what the proponents propose'

"This is going to be a development that could see a tripling of the investment you saw in the MTS Centre, which was about \$125 million," Lahr said.

If fully realized, it will also likely mean the redevelopment of a number of surface parking lots south of Portage Avenue, which have been described as blights on the downtown landscape.

Lahr said as a major stakeholder in the downtown, one of the WCC's roles is to help foster more development in the area. And it realized its own expansion project could give it the leverage to do that.

So the request for proposals (RFP) it issued in July specified the WCC expansion had to be part of a much larger project, which must also include a hotel and a parkade that could be connected to the convention centre. And preferably it should also include a residential project and a mixed-use commercial complex, and a "destination attraction."

"What we were saying was that if you want to do the (convention centre) expansion, you have to bring more to the table..." Lahr added.

The original deadline for proposals to be submitted was Aug. 31. But that was later extended to Wednesday of this week.

Lahr said he's not allowed to say how many proposals were received or who submitted them. But he said the bidders included both national and international players.

He said a team of experts will now review the proposals and recommend which one should be accepted. WCC officials expect to make a final selection before the end of the year, he added.

Lahr said a multi-pronged development would not only help speed up the revitalization of the downtown, but would enable the three levels of government to recoup their investments in the WCC expansion much sooner because of the additional tax revenues that would be generated.

He said it's the same approach the city and province took in the early 1970s when calling for proposals to build the convention centre. They said any proposal had to be accompanied by a plan for redeveloping the block of land immediately east of the convention centre site.

That led to the construction of the Lakeview Square office tower on Carlton Street, what is now the Delta Winnipeg Hotel on St. Mary Avenue, a 1,000-stall underground parkade, a small park, and the two Holiday Towers highrise apartment blocks on Hargrave Street.

"So the recipe was already created then."

The director of development for the city's downtown development agency -- the CentreVenture Development Corp. -- said it would welcome that kind of new development for the downtown.

"It will act as one more piece in the puzzle and support our Portage Avenue redevelopment strategy," Loretta Martin said.

She said CentreVenture is still working on the final version of that strategy, as well as its master plan for a new sports, hospitality, and entertainment district (SHED) it has proposed for the downtown. The district would include the WCC, the MTS Centre, the Alt hotel slated for the north side of Portage Avenue, and the Burton Cummings and Metropolitan theatres.

Martin said the agency hopes to submit its final plans to the city and provincial governments later this fall.

Lakeview Management owns the surface parking lot located immediately west of the convention centre between St. Mary and York avenues. But Wayne Bollman, the firm's vice-president of real estate services, said it didn't bid on the WCC expansion project.

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