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\$75-M park-and-slide

Alberta firm's vision for Forks includes hotel, water park and parkade

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Images from existing Waterfun Products facilities.



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WAYNE GLOWACKI / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS The parking lot being eyed as part of the overall recreation destination at The Forks.

Mayor Sam Katz's dream of using public funds to build a private water park may soon come to fruition in the form of a \$75-million hotel, water park and parkade complex northwest of The Forks.

On Friday, council's downtown and riverbank committee will consider an offer by Drumheller, Alta., hotel chain Canalta to purchase the gravel surface lot known as Parcel Four from the city for \$6 million. Working with Calgary water-park designer Waterfun Products and an undisclosed group of investors, Canalta wants to build a 250-room hotel, a 450-stall parkade and a 50,000-square-foot, stand-alone water park with a wave pool, slides and a lazy river, among other amenities.

The plan also calls for Winnipeg to provide Canalta with a \$7-million grant, contingent upon the completion of a community-access agreement that would provide the city with \$700,000 worth of admission credits every year for the next 25 years.

"In return for the grant, the proponent will have to abide by a public-access agreement. Kids, wherever they come from, will have access to this investment," Mayor Sam Katz said Wednesday, stating he believes there is "overwhelming support" from the public for a water park.

The Canalta proposal is the third water-park plan to be presented to city council since 2008, when Katz championed a plan to replace a \$9-million Kildonan Park pool project with a more modest \$2.8-million job, as well as the \$7-million water-park plan.

This grant was originally awarded to the Canad Inns hotel chain but withdrawn when negotiations between the city and the Winnipeg hotelier faltered. A new

search for a private partner in 2009 led to a response from Winnipeg's Shindico Realty, which was acting as an agent for a water park and hotel developer, according to a report by city real estate manager John Zabudney.

That plan initially involved a luxury hotel but later evolved into the Canalta proposal, Zabudney writes. Shindico continues to act as agent but is not the developer, city property director Barry Thorgrimson said.

Pending council approval on April 25, the first phase of the project -- 125 hotel rooms and the water park -- could open as early as 2013, said Thorgrimson. Canalta operates most of its hotels in small towns and is "excited to come to the big city," he said.

An official with Canalta declined to comment.

The second phase of the complex would involve another 125 hotel rooms and a 450-stall parkade, which could be used by Shaw Park, the Canadian Museum for Human Rights and The Forks, Thorgrimson said.

The land in question was originally set aside for parking for the human rights museum and The Forks. The museum has yet to assess the impact of the water park on its operations, said spokeswoman Angela Cassie. The Forks plans to work with Canalta to ensure the water park fits with pre-existing plans to develop more parking as well as housing near the CN rail line, said Jim August, CEO of The Forks-North Portage Partnership.

"This is a somewhat complicated site," he said.

Katz's plan is likely to win the support of a majority of council members, but there is some opposition. Fort Rouge Coun. Jenny Gerbasi said she's disappointed the Canalta water park will be 10,000 square feet smaller than the facility Canad Inns proposed.

Gerbasi also said she's concerned the city has yet to work out details of the public-access agreement, which would see the city's community services department dole out admission credits through social-service agencies.

"We don't have control over the facility and I don't know if this is the best use of our funds," Gerbasi said.

The city would be better-served spending \$7 million on fixing roads, added Colin Craig, the Manitoba director of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, who said the spending weakens the city's case for more infrastructure funding.

"This is like buying a big-screen TV for your living room and (putting it) under a leaky roof. At some point, you have to fix the roof," Craig said.

Katz, however, said there is no contradiction between offering a grant to a private water park while community centres, pools and hockey rinks are hard up for cash. Creating a water park with public access fulfils the city's recreation mandate, he said.

"Downtown is changing and this will keep things going, in my opinion," Katz said. "Plus, I think this will be a great tourist attraction in the future."

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Plan C for water park

DETAILS of the City of Winnipeg's third plan to use public funds to build a private water park:

Developer: Canalta Real Estate Services, based in Drumheller, Alta., along with Calgary's Waterfun Products and an undisclosed "group of local investors." Winnipeg's Shindico Realty is acting as the agent.

The plan: Build a \$75-million hotel, water park and parkade complex on a 2.1-hectare gravel lot near The Forks known as Parcel Four. Canalta has offered to purchase the land -- located at the southwest corner of Waterfront Drive and William Stephenson Way -- from the city for \$6 million.

Phase One: A 125-room hotel and a stand-alone, 50,000-square-foot water park, to be built as early as 2013. Based on the city's expression-of-interest document, the water park must include a wave pool, waterslides, a lazy river, a swirl pool and a kids' activity pool, among other amenities.

Phase Two: Another 125 hotel rooms and a 450-stall parkade.

City contribution: A \$7-million grant, contingent upon the completion of a community-access agreement resulting in \$700,000 worth of admission credits every year for 25 years. The city would not provide operating funds.

Community access: Admission credits would be doled out to low-income families through social-service organizations.

There would be daily guaranteed hours for public access and no more than 14 days of closure per year for maintenance. The water park would not be forced to accept city-provided credits on public holidays and holiday weekends.

Approval: The plan faces a Friday vote at council's downtown and riverbank committee. It then heads to executive policy committee on April 18 and council as a whole on April 25.

-- source: City of Winnipeg

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