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New project pitched for Forks

By: Geoff Kirbyson

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Proposed mixed-use development at The Forks would be in the area outlined in red in the aerial photo at left. ()

Imagine waking up every morning and having your choice of rivers outside your front door on which to take your daily paddle or cross-country ski.

That dream could become a reality if Jim August is able to find public support for a residential development at The Forks.

The CEO of The Forks North Portage Partnership, the non-profit organization that manages the site, is in the early stages of planning a reconfiguration of the popular tourist destination to coincide with the pending construction of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights.

"We're looking at some form of what we'll call a mixed-use development and we're considering a variety of options. It could (include) residential, but also office and commercial. We're going to look at what makes sense and would be complementary to The Forks and the museum. It's a big part of what I'll be focusing on from January to June. We're at a very early planning stage," he said.

August was quick to point out that a final decision on what to do with the six-acre area -- currently a parking lot located south of Canwest Park -- won't be made before Winnipeggers are asked to weigh in through public consultations and open houses.

"People have a strong ownership of The Forks. Whatever we do there, we're going to need to consult and test out some ideas. Our belief is design becomes of utmost importance," he said, adding some other possibilities for the potential project include a hostel, a small hotel or a fitness centre.

A central piece of the development will be a European-style promenade, a one-kilometre public walkway featuring fountains and sitting areas that will stretch from Pioneer Avenue to The Forks Market, August said.

The impetus for the reconfiguration is being driven by the museum, which will take over about 400 parking spots by the time it's completed several years from now, August said. Another 600 to 800 parking stalls will need to be added adjacent to the rail line running parallel to Main Street, he said.

"If the museum hadn't come on board, we'd probably be into this (project) by now," he said.

The Forks has featured a mixture of parks, gardens and sculptures alongside restaurants and a multitude of shops and other attractions since its rebirth as a central meeting place in 1987. There has never been a

residential component, although there was talk a decade ago of building a 100-unit seniors complex in the middle of The Forks that never came to fruition.

The potential of residential this time around bears little resemblance to that project, August said, largely because the proposed location is a seldom-used parking lot that's closer to Main Street than it is to either the Red or Assiniboine rivers.

Jino Distasio, director of the Institute of Urban Studies at the University of Winnipeg, said the idea of a seniors complex was met with "stiff opposition" in the community.

"I think (the opposition) stemmed from the fact people wanted to keep as much open space as possible (at The Forks)," he said. "It has to be stickhandled carefully by The Forks administration."

Distasio said that as long as Winnipeggers don't perceive a residential option as shrinking open space at The Forks, such a proposal could be endorsed by the public.

"There has to be good design and affordability, too. There could be condos and apartments, affordable units mixed in with more expensive ones. This could be an opportunity to be really innovative," he said, noting Winnipeg has been slow to adopt that type of model, unlike other centres such as Toronto and Vancouver.

The site's last major development, the \$12-million Inn at The Forks hotel which opened four years ago, was dogged by controversy since The Forks announced in 1999 that it would accept hotel proposals. Opponents said the area was already too commercial and a hotel would be an inappropriate addition.

August said regardless of what the ultimate decision is, he wants the development to be "very sustainable," in keeping with its Target Zero plan to minimize its carbon footprint.

"We'd like this to be the greenest public site in the city," he said.

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We Want Your Views

Should residential housing be allowed at The Forks? We'll publish a selection of opinions that are sent to feedback@freepress.mb.ca

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