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Councilman pushing 'Elevator Square' plan

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STAFF WRITER

The collapse of plans for building condominiums on the Water Street property occupied by the Rochester Elevator is giving new life to a proposal aimed at keeping a landmark building on its current site and making it the focal point of a new town square.

Rochester Councilman David Becker has developed a plan that incorporates the barn-like elevator building and the city parking lot at East University and Water into a community gathering place. The plan, dubbed Elevator Square, would require the city to acquire the elevator property, which recently went back on the market.

▼ADVERTISEMENT ▼ The plan hasn't been formally presented to the City Council. However, the council has been meeting in closed session to discuss buying the property, City Manager Ken Johnson confirmed last week. He declined to discuss Becker's proposal.

A recent design study of the east side of the downtown commercial district called for a town square on the block bounded by Water Street, East Street, University and Fourth Street. Several businesses and homes occupy the lot.

Becker said he loved the idea but is opposed to displacing anyone. And he believes his proposal could come in at a lower price tag.

"Now that the condos are gone, this has more validity," he said. "My hope is if the city buys the property, we can sell some of it off for commercial development."

A 1996 study of Water Street called for saving the elevator and making the street a major pedestrian amenity. Becker envisions stores or restaurants behind the elevator, with a walkway connecting the east side of the property to a green space where the parking lot is now.

He points to a 2004 series of visioning sessions, where participants expressed strong support for a town square.

"People really wanted to keep the character of the area," Becker said. "I think we should try to listen to them."

Reaction among council members is mixed. Karen Lewis, who is working on a proposal for an arts center downtown, said she was never excited about the town square concept. In addition, she's concerned a costly environmental cleanup may be required on the elevator property, which has already received brownfield designation from the city.

"What if it costs another million to clean up that lot? And then if you're going to save the elevator, it's going to cost a lot of money," she said. "This isn't about a town square, this is about a barn."

Councilman Jeffrey Cuthbertson said he likes the idea and won't rule it out at this stage.

"I think keeping the elevator in the core of downtown is important to the character of the community," he said.

"The tricky part, of course, is the financing. The cost of the property itself, assuming we can come to an agreement on that, there's potential environmental issues. ... We've had some closed-session discussion about next steps. ...

"It's a good concept, it bears investigation and there may be creative ways to finance it."

Becker thinks the city could take the lead on Elevator Square, while the Downtown Development Authority has already indicated its willingness to be part of the proposed art center development.

He and Cuthbertson believe both projects can be accomplished.

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This is local artist Gerry Post's rendering of Rochester Councilman Dave Becker's Elevator Square proposal along Water Street, south of University.

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"I don't think that they're mutually exclusive," Cuthbertson said.

"A lot of details on the art center are still forming, but my understanding is the lion's share of the money people are talking about is going to be private dollars. I think the city can certainly make a substantial contribution ... to show our commitment to it and still think about funding the town center concept around the barn site."

Lewis disagrees.

"The elevator is just in such bad shape," she said. "I would rather see it stay in the private sector. Look at the (Rochester Mills) building. ... That was the private sector had a vision. And they saved that building and made a viable business."

The Rochester-Avon Historical Society had been raising money and in-kind donations in preparation for moving the elevator before the condominium deal fell through. The historical society has said it would prefer keeping the elevator on its current site and would continue to be involved in the restoration, even if the city buys the building.

Becker admits the significant investment of tax dollars is "scary." He also said the art center is "critical for Rochester, almost more important than this."

"But I think you can do both. ...

"I want to be here when this happens."

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