



Executive Summary

Lot C Advisory Committee Process

La Crosse County / La Crosse, WISCONSIN / April 2014



COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP & PROCESS

Committee Members

Matt Boshcka
Corrie Brekke
Dane Gonzales
James Cherf
Sr Georgia Christensen
Rusty Cunningham
Art Fahey
Bruce Friell
Tara Johnson
Mayor Tim Kabat
Joe Kruse
Deb Lash

Paul Medinger
Robin Moses
Mark Platt
Lee Rasch
Todd Restel
Dave Ring
Janet Rosseter
Brent Smith
Katherine Svitavsky
Joe Veenstra
Charley Weeth
Dan Wettstein

Meeting Schedule

February 19, 2014: Summary of County Administrative Center & Downtown Campus Study Committee Charge to the Committee
Process, Site History & Characteristics, and Market Analysis

March 6, 2014: Presentation on City Vision 2020 Plan
Initial Impressions Survey
Visual Preference Survey
Visioning Exercise

March 20, 2014: Committee Review and Discussion of Visioning Work
Review of Structured Parking Alternatives
Visualization of Potential Development of Lot C

April 3, 2014: Closing Thoughts Survey
Review of Summary of Work
Overview of RFQ/RFP Process
Final Recommendations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: LA CROSSE COUNTY, LOT C ADVISORY COMMITTEE PROCESS

Introduction and Background

The County formed an Administrative Center & Downtown Campus Study Committee to evaluate all of the issues associated with County space needs and options for future changes. That committee decided to sell the existing Administrative Center and subsequently recommended that the County purchase the Associated Bank building.

The future use of Lot C was considered as part of that overall evaluation process and the possibility of locating a new County Administration building on Lot C was considered early in that process. The Committee decided and the County Board agreed to not encumber the future planning for Lot C by any building space needs associated with the County.

Instead the Committee felt that the redevelopment of Lot C presented a rare opportunity to convert a surface parking lot into a valuable, tax-generating development, strategically positioned to meet several community needs and respond to market demand. Faced with a short time to make several related decisions, the County invited representatives from a broad and diverse cross-section of community stakeholders to join the Lot C Advisory Committee.

The Committee's Purpose

This is an example of a process that was conducted without the benefit of a clearly defined outcome. Rather, the County Board invited these community leaders to assist them in exploring ways to "maximize the value of Lot C" by completing analysis and providing input before seeking a private development partner.

The Committee was provided with considerable information about the physical characteristics of Lot C, history, neighborhood context, infrastructure, and zoning and other regulatory controls and market research. When they had this information, the Committee participated in several surveys, discussions and other exercises aimed at identifying expectations and community preferences to guide the future development of Lot C. The results of each of these surveys and exercises are contained on the County Website: <http://www.co.la-crosse.wi.us/lotC.asp>

The Process

The process that the Lot C Advisory Committee participated in is graphically illustrated on the attached figure. This process is patterned after the same due diligence process that a developer would conduct for any project. The idea behind the process is to assemble relevant information and identify steps that could be taken by the County and the City, working collaboratively, to eliminate uncertainty and remove barriers to investment for developers.

The process was designed in stages to allow the Committee and the Board to stop at any stage and seek developer proposals. The basis for this decision is whether or not this community work was continuing to add value and improve the conditions for development.

The Market Research

In Fall 2013 Stantec conducted a market assessment of Lot C to better understand its market potential for mixed-use development. The assessment included an evaluation of socio-economic trends affecting downtown La Crosse, analysis of market data, case studies of mixed-use developments in similar-sized cities, and interviews with developers familiar with the La Crosse market.

The market study revealed that the socio-economic conditions and current market trends were very favorable for a mixed-use development in downtown La Crosse. Furthermore, the case studies revealed that compact mixed-use developments have been successful in other similar-sized cities and that many of them have been catalysts for additional nearby development.

The developer interviews concluded that there is a significant amount of interest to develop in the downtown and on Lot C. The site has advantages attractive to developers and that a number of uses could work together on the site. Nonetheless, the economics of making a prominent downtown development work given achievable rents in the market means that public involvement will likely be required on some level. In general, though, there appears to be adequate market support and willingness to develop a public/private development on Lot C, if there is public support for the initial construction of a reasonable parking arrangement at a minimum.

Summary of Committee Input

In addition to general discussion at the workshop meetings, the Committee responded to two electronic surveys (Survey Monkey) a visual preference survey and completed a visioning exercise. The detailed results of all of these are available on the County website. An abridged summary of the key Committee input is as follows:

- 100% support for the process, with most supporting the idea of the Committee continuing to meet as long as their work added value and clarified community expectations. The remainder simply noted that a developer should be engaged at some point, which was always the intent.
- Unanimous recognition of the importance of creating taxable value through the sale and development of this lot with 19% acknowledging that tax base is good, but recognizing other important priorities too.
- 76% noted the importance of design sensitivity to the adjacent historic district, but felt that taller buildings with more contemporary features could be sited there if well designed. 19% felt that the historic district should be a more important consideration.
- There are no minimum parking requirements in the downtown district. All of the developers interviewed identified parking as essential to any project they would consider on Lot C. The Committee recognized parking as important and supported parking under buildings and in structured parking screened by buildings and architectural features and taking full advantage of other available parking in the surrounding area.
- If a successful mixed use development could not succeed on Lot C without some public support for the initial construction of a parking arrangement, the County and the City should work together to find the most cost-effective way to finance the construction and structure development agreements with building owners and tenants to fully reimburse the public as quickly as possible

and cover all of the costs associated with parking operations and maintenance.

- The Committee strongly recognized the value of public realm improvements and streetscape and recognized that some open space or plazas may be beneficial components of a successful future mixed use development. The vast majority did not feel that it was essential that this space be publicly owned and maintained
- There was strong support for transit use, bicycles and pedestrian improvements, while being realistic about climate and other limiting factors.
- The County, City, and private partners will work together throughout the development of Lot C to ensure that it compliments and enhances the economic climate in Downtown La Crosse and results in a net gain to the community.

Visual Preference Survey

Both the visual preference survey itself and the results are available on the County website. Some of the key findings include:

- Strong appreciation for architectural design that complimented the image and character of Downtown La Crosse. Positive responses were given to buildings taller than historic La Crosse, as long as the buildings had a strong base, middle and a top and the materials were compatible with the surrounding area. There was also support for some unique designs, but not modern all glass structures.
- The Committee strongly favored examples of parking structures that were screened by other buildings and retail spaces. Where this isn't possible, they favored architectural solutions that effectively screened the parking and matched adjacent buildings. Utilitarian, bare concrete parking structures were not acceptable to the Committee
- Strong preference was also evident for examples where the building design and associated public realm were oriented to pedestrians. This included attractive store fronts, comfortable walkways and images of outdoor dining were not surprisingly also ranked highly.
- Signage was supported if it included effective wayfinding for pedestrians and was well designed and complimented the building architecture. Franchise signage and a proliferation of cluttered and garish signs were not acceptable.
- The presence of water was viewed favorably in public plazas and open spaces and spaces that included trees and landscaping were preferred over spaces with all hard surfaces, even if they were well designed.

SUMMARY

The Lot C Advisory Committee supports the development of Lot C for a mixture of complimentary uses that will add significantly to the tax base and employment in downtown La Crosse and have other positive benefits. The Committee supports the collaboration between the City and the County to maximize this opportunity, working in partnership with a master developer and other development partners.

The Committee supports the rezoning of Lot C to the most appropriate downtown zoning district to be determined through the current zoning study being conducted by the City. The Committee recognizes that adequate, convenient and affordable parking is an essential component of a successful, compact

and dense mixed use development. They expect the City and the County to work with the selected developer and pursue the financing strategy that promises to be the most successful and reimburses the public as soon as possible and includes a strategy that ensures efficient operations and effective on- going maintenance.

Finally, the Committee worked hard to provide any future developer with clarity about community expectations. They recognize the unique role that La Crosse County has played in this process and value the cooperation and collaboration with the City and a private developer that will be essential to the ultimate success of the development of Lot .