
Park with lake among ideas for downtown

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BEAUMONT -- Three weeks after announcing a post-Hurricane Rita plan to redevelop Beaumont's waterfront and continue downtown revitalization, the city's ambitious vision is snapping into focus. "The plan right now is we're only booking events at the Civic Center until June 2006," City Manager Kyle Hayes said. "We'll go out for bids on the demolition of the Civic Center next year and have a plan in place to hopefully demolish the Civic Center in July 2006."

Facing an almost \$6 million repair bill for city-owned buildings damaged during the storm, Hayes instead proposed a bold downtown redevelopment plan Oct. 18.

"There seems to be general support for the idea," Mayor Guy Goodson said. "Of course there are going to be questions about cost, and people want to see conceptual drawings."

Along with the Civic Center -- which suffered at least \$225,000 in damage -- Hayes proposed demolishing the Beaumont Public Library's downtown building to make way for a new municipal complex. Also tagged for demolition in the initial plan -- once the municipal complex was complete -- were City Hall and the police station.

"I think the reactions from most is that this is the time to think outside the box and it's the perfect timing if we're going to do something bold like this," Jim Rich, Greater Beaumont Chamber of Commerce president, said by phone.

However, Hayes said the city is studying all its options. One of these is the transformation of the former First Security National Bank building at the corner of Orleans and Bowie streets for use as office space.

"We're not moving forward with the design of a new municipal complex," Hayes said. "We can't do all this at one time and we need to study what's in our best interest."

The passage of Proposition 1 on Tuesday's ballot, an amendment creating a fund to help cities move railroad tracks in the way of development, also could affect Beaumont's plans. A key element to the redevelopment of the city's waterfront is moving the Kansas City Southern tracks near the Neches River.

"It could help, but I haven't read the legislation," Hayes said. "That money may help move the (Burlington Northern-Santa Fe) tracks along the river. The first step is the port getting KCS to acquiesce and move their tracks."

One project the city is moving forward with is a downtown park. The proposed site is bordered by the Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway to the west, Crockett Street to the south, Neches Street to the east and an abandoned rail line on the north.

"We're talking about the next step, and we'll have to be able to live downtown to have a vital downtown," Rich said. "That's what many cities have recognized."

[The 16-acre park will include a 10-acre man-made lake with walking and jogging trails on the lake's perimeter.](#)

"Residents and business would embrace a green space. Every downtown needs that type of space to attract investors," Carolyn Howard, executive director of Beaumont Main Street, said by phone.

"Being Beaumont's first neighborhood, we need a people place like that, especially if we want residential development downtown."

Hayes said the city is planning to start with land acquisition for the park within 60 days, but because there are numerous property owners, it could take some time.

"We're also moving forward with the design of the Martin Luther King Jr. park," Hayes said.

Another project the city is concentrating on is the \$2.2 million renovation of the Julie Rogers Theatre.

The theatre, already scheduled for a two-phase renovation before Rita, suffered \$1.5 million in damage during the storm. To repair and renovate the theater will cost a total of \$2.2 million, of which the city will pay \$1.7 million, Hayes said.

"What's great about downtown is that it's everyone's. There's no West End, North End or South End," Hayes said. "We want to make downtown attractive for not only the public, but investors. We want the city to be out front with that effort."

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