

The Bristol Press

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News

Renaissance gets downtown nod

Monday, December 21, 2009 11:01 PM EST

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BRISTOL — In a 5-1 vote, the Bristol Downtown Development Corp. Monday named Long Island developer Renaissance Downtowns as its choice to tackle the city-owned former mall property.

"Finally we're at the start," said BDDC board member John Lodovico. "We're at the gate."

The vote came after Don Monti, president of Renaissance, and Bristol developer Ed D'Amato Sr. told the BDDC that they'd reached an agreement — D'Amato would withdraw his application to be the city's preferred developer and Monti would make D'Amato part of his team.

"We're just stepping aside so this thing can go on," D'Amato said.

Monti said D'Amato's company has expertise in Bristol.

"They would provide us with consulting services throughout the process," said Monti. "There is no formal partnership."

Board member Jennifer Janelle cast the sole vote in opposition, saying she wanted to have more than two developers to choose from.

She said she was "very, very disappointed" that D'Amato stepped aside, especially given the "glowing references" the company received on its work.

When he addressed the board before the vote, D'Amato read a formal statement prepared by his office and joked that they didn't want him to go off script.

D'Amato said his team, "as both residents and taxpayers" are excited about Monti's plans for downtown. He said they understood the "daunting task" the BDDC faced in choosing a preferred developer and said the team "stands ready to support Renaissance" if it is selected.

BDDC board members, who were deadlocked last week in votes that showed a preference for Renaissance but not enough to approve the company, thanked the two developers for reaching an accord.

BDDC Chairman Frank Johnson and board members Lodovico, Tom Cosgrove, Richard Kallenbach and Gardner Wright voted in favor of Renaissance.

Monti “put together some of the best minds in the country to look at cities,” said Cosgrove. “He’s at a cutting edge of a new idea.”

Monti’s proposal hinges on a large amount of housing, including a hotel, downtown. He has said making sure that people are there is key. A train near the site is important, he said, but added that he would move forward with or without a rail component.

Being named the preferred developer means Monti will have the exclusive right to draw up a plan for the 17-acre former mall site. He has already begun meeting downtown property owners and others who have a stake in the vacant site, which is at the heart of the city.

Monti has promised to spend his own money developing a plan for the property with no obligation by the city to accept it. The preferred developer agreement will give him about two years to form the plan and get things rolling. It will have a timetable and benchmarks along the way that Renaissance will have to meet.

About 50 people — mostly current or former city officials, commissioners and other people active in the community — turned out to watch the BDDC vote, applauding afterward.

“It’s an important night for Bristol,” said Johnson. “Bristol can have a downtown and should have a downtown that we can be proud of in the future.”

Johnson said everyone on the BDDC cares deeply about the city and he vowed that the board would continue to safeguard city tax dollars.

“We’re not giving them the keys to City Hall. We’re not giving them a deed to the property,” Johnson said.

But he said the step of naming Renaissance the preferred developer -- something that must yet be approved by city councilors and put into a legal contract -- is a crucial first step.

“We look forward to a great new year,” said Kallenbach.

When BDDC members asked about the particulars of the deal between him and D’Amato, Monti said the two developers agreed it would remain confidential.

“This is a private agreement,” said Monti, who said several times that it would be put in writing. He said if both sides are happy with it, that should be enough.

Next, city councilors are expected to vote at their January meeting whether to approve Renaissance.

If they approve, representatives from the BDDC, the city and Renaissance are to meet within two weeks of the council meeting to begin negotiations on a preferred developer agreement.

Renaissance and the BDDC have agreed that a preferred developer contract should be in place within 120 days of that negotiating meeting, unless an extension is granted. That means a contract deadline of about the end of May.

Monti said he wants to get started soon.

"I would like to get this process under way as quickly as possible. I do not drag my feet," Monti said.

Hammering out a preferred development agreement could be an interesting process.

"There are an awful lot of things that people want included in the preferred developer agreement," said Johnson.

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