

BRISTOL THE OBSERVER

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City tries different bait fishing for developers

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The Bristol Downtown Development Corporation is poised once again to cast its line into the sea of perspective developers. Only this time, the corporation is going to use different bait. The corporation will be issuing a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) for developers to develop the 17-acre former mall site downtown, now known as "Depot Square." "It completely makes much more sense than the direction we had previously gone," said City Councilor Ken Cockayne, who is the council's liaison to the corporation.

The corporation was created by former Mayor William Stortz to handle development of the site. Initially the corporation sought out a developer to buy and develop the site with a Request for Proposals (RFP) last year. The corporation received only one proposal. Although the proposal contained a detailed drawing of what city leaders wanted on the site, it contained no evidence that the company could actually go through with what was in the drawing. "There was no substance behind the company," said Frank Johnson, chair of the corporation. The corporation ultimately rejected the proposal and set off to find a different means of attracting a developer.

After speaking with representatives at its June meeting with the development firms Konover of Farmington and Renaissance Downtowns of Plainview, NY, the corporation has settled on what path to travel. "We don't want to do another RFP. We think that's too much of a burden to put on companies," said Johnson. Johnson said an RFP can cost companies up to \$75,000. Johnson said the corporation will approve a RFQ at its July meeting.

The corporation already has a draft RFQ in place, explained Richard Harrall of the consulting firm Harrall-Michalowski Associates, which is serving as the corporation's executive director. He said the RFQ will need some minor fine tuning before July, but that it will be ready to go next month. The big differences between an RFQ and an RFP are the RFQ doesn't require as much detail. Harrall said the RFQ will not seek a detailed plan, although firms may submit a preliminary development plan if they choose, and it

will not require firms submit financial information. Rather, Harrall explained, the RFQ will focus on companies' past projects and their qualifications. Going this route, he said, usually leads to more responses. "Generally, you get a larger number of responses to a RFQ than you would to a RFP," said Harrall. Once the RFQ is approved, officials said they expect to set a short deadline for responses, somewhere between 30 days and 60 days.

After the deadline has passed, Johnson said the corporation will review the responses and interview responding firms in order to select its "preferred developer." Johnson said naming a "preferred developer" allows for the opportunity for more specific planning, and could lead to stores becoming more interested in the project because there's a developer's name attached to the development. Johnson estimated responses will be back by fall. Once a preferred developer was selected, he said it would take about a year to plan the development. Judging by that time table, Johnson was hopeful the city could be ready to move as the country is coming out of the current recession. Despite the current economic conditions, Johnson said the corporation doesn't want to wait too long to move ahead with the project. "If you wait too long you could miss the next building cycle," Johnson said. The corporation's new plan of attack has the support of the development community.

"The RFQ, I think, is more helpful for the municipality," said Donald Monti, president and CEO of Renaissance Downtowns. Monti said his company is a strong believer in public-private partnerships, and that issuing a RFQ is the best way for municipalities to evaluate development companies. The process, he said, enables municipalities to interview each developer and evaluate their qualifications in a very open and transparent manner.

Once a "preferred developer" is selected, Monti said, the city and the developer then can move forward with molding a strategic vision for the development. "It allows for a broader vision," said Monti. Despite the weeks that stand between the corporation issuing the RFQ, it already has one company interested in responding. Monti added his company is looking forward to responding to the RFQ when it's issued. He felt Bristol and "Depot Square" are full of potential. "I love, love Bristol. I think that there are tremendous opportunities there. ... I think (Bristol) has all the backbone and all the structure in place. There's a lot of charm and heritage there."

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