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News

ESPN, hospital like prospect of housing downtown

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BRISTOL — Two of the city's largest employers — ESPN and Bristol Hospital — like the prospect of having a lot of new housing available downtown.

Mayor Art Ward said he's spoken with representatives of both entities about plans for a new development downtown on the 17-acre city-owned former mall site.

"Both of them are excited," said Ward, about having residential options nearby.

The hospital, which is physically closest to the project and continues to develop and bring in new doctors, is especially interested, said Ward.

Renaissance Downtowns, the Long Island firm chosen by the Bristol Downtown Development Corp. as its preferred developer for the mall site, has stressed that housing is a key part of its philosophy.

"I like it," the development could be "the nucleus" of a downtown revitalization, said Bristol Hospital President Kurt Barwis.

The hospital, with 1,675 workers, is "constantly recruiting," physicians as well as top managers, he said.

"We need professional space," and a tour of the city is part of every higher level interview the hospital does, he said. Being able to show off a new downtown neighborhood with restaurants, commercial, retail and cultural components would make a difference, he said.

Because the destiny of the city and its hospital are "inseparably linked," said Barwis, "having a project that is economically viable in downtown is exciting."

Don Monti, president of Renaissance, said he wants to include everyone — business, citizens, organizations and property owners — in the discussions and planning of the new downtown development.

That includes ESPN.

"We expect a large outreach to them," said Monti.

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We think it's pivotal that they be involved in this process."

ESPN Vice President Mike Soltys said people move here from around the country to take jobs at ESPN. Many of them live in Bristol but others choose to live elsewhere based on their needs or their family's needs.

"New housing options nearby would be a plus for people that move here," said Soltys. "Ultimately it's up to the employee to decide where they're going to live."

Frank Johnson, the chairman of the BDDC, said ESPN has offered to survey its employees to find out what amenities they'd want to have in an area where they might live.

The question facing Bristol, said Johnson, is what does the city have to do to create a downtown atmosphere that would be an attractive place where ESPN employees want to live.

"It's frustrating to me that the majority of ESPN employees do not live in Bristol," said Johnson. But he said he can understand the choice.

When faced with a small downtown area with shops and restaurants in nearby Southington, or even Plainville, said Johnson, a condo or apartment in Bristol might not be able to measure up.

Last fall, ESPN released information on where its employees live. Of the about 3,400 Connecticut-based employees, about 25 percent live in Bristol, the town that claims the largest share.

Next in line is West Hartford, a town with a recently revamped downtown after the addition of the Blue Back Square development. As of last fall, about 8.5 percent of ESPN's workforce lived there.

Southington, which also has an improved downtown and is a closer commute than West Hartford, claimed about 6.5 percent of the ESPN workforce, followed by Farmington, with 5 percent.

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