

Friday, September 11, 2009 9:12 PM EDT

New visions for downtown

By JACKIE MAJERUS
STAFF WRITER

BRISTOL — Two developers interested in the former downtown mall property submitted their qualifications to the city Friday, outlining in broad strokes their vision for the site.

Renaissance Downtowns, a Plainview, N.Y., company, and D'Amato Realty of Bristol made the 3 p.m. Friday bidding deadline at City Hall.

The more extensive of the two, Renaissance Downtown's packet, captured the attention of officials who were on hand to see the bids.

Frank Johnson, chairman of the Bristol Downtown Development Corp., the nonprofit agency that will evaluate the bids, said he liked the idea put forth by the Long Island developers to have rooftop gardens on parking areas. He noted that the firm put in a connection from the old mall site to a possible train station as well as to Federal Hill, and included the Memorial Boulevard School site under the scope of the plan.

"They did their homework," said Johnson. "You're not kidding," said John Lodovico, another BDDC board member. "They even picked up the rail station. They got the whole package here."

Lodovico said Renaissance appeared to have a strong staff and financial backing, something he said would be "key."

The D'Amato proposal, which was shorter, approached the project in stages, starting with the land on Main Street as the first phase. National retail tenants would locate there, serving as anchors, the D'Amato plan said. Over time, the D'Amato proposal read, the other phases could be developed for a mixture of uses, including residential, commercial and office space as well. Surface and garage parking and public facilities, such as a new City Hall, are also planned.

In its submission, Renaissance proposed "a radical transformation of Depot Square from a vacant lot into a vibrant new district that reconnects downtown and serves as a catalyst for further revitalization."

The New York company said it would bring a "broad mix of uses that include housing, retail, hospitality, office, parking and open space."

Initial plans in the Renaissance submission suggest 750 residential units, 60,000 square feet of retail space including a 15,000 to 20,000 square-foot “urban grocery” as well as 50,000 square feet of office space. The plan also calls for a 100-room hotel, 220,000 square feet of urban open space and 1,550 parking spaces.

Their scheme would appeal primarily to “empty nesters and young professionals,” the Renaissance submission said, because of the higher density of urban living and the prospect of some of them living and working in the site.

A “pedestrian oriented civic plaza will be the centerpiece” of the district, according to Renaissance.

D’Amato’s proposal also said the project should be pedestrian friendly and safe and include open space for individual and public gathering places. It included access to mass transit and any potential passenger train.

The D’Amato proposal listed Charles Nyberg as the lead architect on the project and said it might incorporate Bristol history by using carousel and clock-themed displays on walkways.

City Purchasing Agent Roger Rousseau handled the bidding process for the BDDC.

“We’ve got something to work with,” Rousseau told Mayor Art Ward.

“I’m optimistic,” said Ward, who said the BDDC will decide what happens next.

Lodovico said he is “cautiously optimistic.”

“I’m guardedly enthusiastic,” said Johnson.

Last time the BDDC sought developer proposals for the former mall site, the search yielded just one actual proposal, which turned out to lack any financial backing.

Lodovico said he recalled that professionals from Breslin Realty listed in the Renaissance proposal as “strategic partners” had taken part in a March 2008 BDDC bus tour of Bristol offered to potential developers.

“They were really, really interested,” said Lodovico.

Clough, Harbour & Associates, the environmental engineers hired by the BDDC to do work on the former mall site last February, was listed among the many professionals in the Renaissance proposal.

The BDDC is expected to discuss the proposals when it meets Sept. 21.