

Wednesday, February 2, 2011

Kent parking garage no longer stalled? Mayor delivers hopeful message



A developer might finally take over the half-built parking garage in downtown Kent to construct a mixed-use development that could include apartments, a hotel, and maybe office and retail space.

Kent Mayor Suzette Cooke revealed the upbeat news about the project during her sixth annual State of the City address Wednesday at the Kent Chamber of Commerce monthly membership luncheon at the ShoWare Center second-floor banquet room.

Developers Goodman Real Estate of Seattle, Urban Renaissance Group of Seattle and SRM Development of Spokane were selected by a city committee to submit a request for proposal to build a mixed-use project on the property, she said. The three were chosen from among nine developers that submitted requests for qualification to the city.

"Three very well-qualified teams were selected to compete when we publish our request for proposals later this month," Cooke said. "They will have 45 days to respond to our request for proposals that will describe their plan in more details."

City officials expect to choose a developer in April and construction could start by spring 2012, said Kurt Hanson, city economic development director, in a Wednesday phone interview.

The city acquired the property at the corner of Fourth Avenue North and Smith Street in October after a couple of years of litigation.

Originally slated to be a 355-stall parking garage with condominiums and retail space, work stopped on the project in May 2007 when the developer's lender withheld funds. Since Ben Errez, the original developer, walked off the project, the property has been entangled in legal battles, and had become a sore spot with locals who passed the half-built structure every day.

The site is now named Kent City Center.

"I can confidently say we are on our way," Cooke said. "Hopefully, by this time next year we will be nearing completion of a fabulous addition to our community."

The more likely timeline would be for construction to start by spring 2012, Hanson said.

Cooke said the three finalists were selected based on how well they are capitalized as well as whether they have a proven record of success, are able to execute the project in the near future and whether they recognize and are able to fulfill the city's vision for the property.

City officials want a mixed-use development that would serve all ages, such as a hotel or apartments with office and retail space, Hanson said.

Greg Haffner, a Kent business and real estate attorney with the Curran Law Firm, attended Cooke's address and came away pleased to hear about future development of the unfinished parking garage. "That would be huge," said Haffner, whose office sits just a block away from the garage. "That has been a big blight right in the middle of downtown for at least four years. Obviously, right now they just have three companies identified as being interested in the project. The city seems optimistic that something is going to happen with that project within a year. I don't think it will get completed in a year, but hopefully it will break ground within a year."

Haffner expects the city to benefit once a developer finishes construction.

"Any kind of improvement to that part of town will make a big difference in the city," Haffner said. "That has definitely been a sore spot for business owners in the heart of downtown and seeing how long it's taken to get something done. Hopefully, things will turn around and be very productive on that corner."

Andrea Keikkala, executive director of the Kent Chamber of Commerce, also expects good results from a new development downtown.

"We're very excited about the old parking center going out for bid and seeing the new Kent City Center," Keikkala. "It would really help if someone came in and got rid of the albatross."

Cooke also addressed the city-owned ShoWare Center, city budgets and flooding during her nearly 40-minute speech.

Despite the arena losing \$398,000 last year after losing \$451,000 in 2009, Cooke said the more than 700,000 people who have visited the ShoWare in two years bring additional revenue to restaurants and other businesses near the center.

"With more than 700,000 people attending events here even during a recession and with regional and national media attention, this building is a great success and will further put Kent on the map when the economy rebounds," Cooke said.

Cooke said the city went through tough economic times last year when it had to cut \$7 million from the city budget after a \$6 million cut in 2009. But she said those cutbacks helped Kent from making further cuts with its 2011 budget.

The city has set aside \$1 million in an emergency flood fund for 2011 in case the Green River overflows and damages property because the Howard Hanson Dam is not fully operational as it undergoes repairs from the January 2009 rainstorm. She said the city also is working on a long-term project to repair and certify the levees throughout the city to protect property and lower insurance rates.

The city also is keeping a close eye on the Legislature to make sure the city continues to receive sales tax revenue from the state to fund the Panther Lake annexation, Cooke said. Nearly 24,000 Panther Lake resident joined the city last July.

Cooke's address was taped for viewing on Comcast Channel 21 and www.kenttv21.com.