San Antonio Express-News (TX)

November 24, 2015

Suggestions on way for lands near missions; City urging residents' input

*Benjamin Olivo*

San Antonio officials say that by May, they will have recommendations for land use around the city's five Spanish colonial missions, collectively named a World Heritage site this past summer. And they say those recommendations, part of an overall multifaceted strategy, will emerge after an “extensive civic engagement process.”

The issue of development near and around the missions turned into a full-blown controversy over the summer when residents near Mission San José opposed a plan by 210 Developers of San Antonio to build a 144-unit, six-building apartment complex on L&H Packing Co.'s former meatpacking plant across from that mission's visitors center.

Since then, the rhetoric has cooled - mostly because it appears that the deal is dead.

In an email Monday, 210 Developers partner Mark Tolley described the project as “permanently on hold.”

District 3 Councilwoman Rebecca Viagran told her council colleagues in mid-October that she does not support the proposal for the L&H site.

The dispute led to the creation of the Alliance for San Antonio Missions, a group mostly composed of residents near Mission San José that wants the city to put a moratorium on development near the missions until an assessment can be completed.

The city feels it's doing that assessment with its land-use plan, but it also isn't blocking projects if they successfully traverse the city's checks-and-balances process for new development.

Such was the case for a mixed-use project around Mission Concepción. In October, the City Council approved that proposal, also by 210 Developers, to add apartments and office space behind the mission. Although the alliance opposed the plan, Viagran voted in favor of it, and it was endorsed by the Roosevelt Park Neighborhood Association.

As for the L&H site, the alliance plans to ask the city and elected officials to earmark funds from a 2017-2020 bond program to buy the property so it can be converted into green space.

The city's World Heritage Work Plan, the framework for the city's broader plan that will include land use, calls for the bond program to be used as a source of funds for infrastructure needs such as streets and sidewalks. It does not mention purchasing land.

Neal Leonard, owner of the L&H site, has said he is open to selling the land to be used for green space.

“Sure, the property's for sale,” Leonard said. “At this point it is. I don't have a plan to develop it, but it is for sale.”

For now, city officials are busy working on fleshing out the broader plan, which includes hiring a World Heritage director and having the person in place in January.

Officials also are seeking feedback from the community on the other aspects of what World Heritage should mean for the missions beyond land use: signs, infrastructure, transportation, economic development and marketing.
Along the way, city officials have been hosting symposiums in order to get that feedback - the next is scheduled for Dec. 5. The last one was in October.

The alliance has scheduled its own series of community meetings, the latest one taking place Sunday.

“We're all here to listen,” Viagran said at the alliance's Sunday meeting. “Again, it is important for you to be there (at the city's meetings) and be a part of the breakout sessions and work sessions that we will be having.”

The alliance's Sunday meeting attempted to identify the intangible values - those beyond just the buildings themselves - that are intrinsic to the communities surrounding the missions.

“If we don't … take the time to say why we value this place, and all we do is talk about what we want to see in the future, whether this development is good, this development is bad, we forget to stop and think, ‘Why is the place important to us in the first place, and what do we want to have that's going to endure,’” said Bill Dupont, the director of the University of Texas at San Antonio's Center of Cultural Sustainability and Sunday's moderator.

Ramon Vasquez of the group American Indians in Texas at the Spanish Colonial Missions identified some of those intangible values Sunday.

“We are talking about the living people here - from the burial grounds that still exist to the mom-and-pop stores of lineal descendant families,” Vasquez said.

Others at the meeting supported development. Daniel Medrano, a panelist, was representing VFW Post 9186, which wants to see development on some of its property behind Mission San José.

“We are here to see what can be done,” Medrano said. “We're hear to leave some kind of a legacy that our children will be proud of.”

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Online

Interactive: Explore a map of the city's missions at ExpressNews.com.

FROM GRAPHIC:

Next World Heritage symposium

Topics: Small-business development, defining and understanding the missions experience, infrastructure and way-finding

When: 9 a.m.-noon, Dec. 5

Where: STEM High School, Harlandale ISD, 4440 Apollo