

Detroit Free Press

Panel set to hear from potential riverfront planners

BY: John Gallagher
FREE STAFF WRITER

Probably no area of Detroit holds so much promise for new development as the east riverfront. Stretching from downtown to Belle Isle between Jefferson Avenue to the waterfront, the district has long been the focus of plans for everything from upscale condominiums to casinos.

Now a new city panel this week will hear from seven teams of experts that hope to win a commission to fashion a new vision for the east riverfront. The seven teams will present their credentials and preliminary thoughts on the riverfront at public meetings Tuesday and Wednesday at the Michigan Department of Natural Resources' Outdoor Adventure Center at 1801 Atwater.



The Michigan Outdoor Adventure Center is one on the latest East Riverfront developments on the Detroit's riverfront, is photographed on Thursday, Jan. 21, 2016.

A committee including Maurice Cox, Detroit's planning director, and Mark Wallace, CEO of the Detroit RiverFront Conservancy that builds and manages the RiverWalk, will listen to the seven presentations and choose a winning team. The team is expected to present its vision and recommendations to the city by this summer.

Multiple interests and constituencies must be represented in any final vision, Wallace said last week.

"The riverfront district has become an economic engine for the city," he said. "We expect to see thousands of new jobs created over the next five years and a significant new tax base that will support the work of the city. But as we do this work, we need to make sure the riverfront still represents the diversity that makes Detroit great."

He added, "The riverfront today is a place where everyone feels welcome and that's what makes it special. It's a place that brings out the best in us. We need to make sure the riverfront remains accessible to all the Detroiters who use it throughout the year and love it."

Each of the seven teams selected to make presentations consists of several individual firms. Several are local architecture and planning firms, including Hamilton-Anderson Associates, McIntosh Poris, the Detroit office of the national Gensler firm, and the engineering firm Giffels Webster. Multiple national firms are also included, including major firms such as Skidmore Owings & Merrill.

Among the issues the winning team must grapple with are how to overcome parking shortages in the district as more people visit the RiverWalk; how to make it easier for residents north of Jefferson Avenue to cross the nine-lane roadway to get down to the waterfront; how to include greenways and bicycle paths in the district; and figuring out the proper mix of residential units, retail, and commercial space.

The visioning exercise is paid for with a mix including City of Detroit funds, philanthropic foundation gifts, and corporate donations.

Once selected, the winning team will have to set up community meetings to hear from residents. That's a critical part of the process, Wallace said.

"The history of the riverfront is really steeped in community engagement," he said. "We think it's important for the public to have a very strong voice in planning any part of the city. We don't want to select a team that's just going to go back into their offices and start drawing. We expect their first step to be a robust community discussion around priorities for the district."

The city's east riverfront was first developed in the 1700s as French ribbon farms, and later became a center of shipping and heavy industry. Beginning in the 1980s, the City of Detroit made a concerted effort to transform the east riverfront into a place of recreation and, more recently, of new housing development.

But the city's aborted plan in the 1990s to build Detroit's three casinos along the water fell through only after wiping out several existing businesses there. And more recently the Great Recession and other challenges delayed many redevelopment plans.

Today the east riverfront includes residential complexes like Harbortown and commercial sites like the General Motors-UAW joint training center, but also a lot of vacant land and abandoned buildings that await some new use.

The public is invited to the team presentations that begin at 9 a.m. Tuesday, run all day, and resume Wednesday morning at 8:30 a.m. for a half-day session.

Contact John Gallagher: 313-222-5173 or gallagher@freepress.com. Follow him on Twitter [@jgallagherfreep](https://twitter.com/jgallagherfreep).

<http://www.freep.com/story/money/business/michigan/2016/01/23/detroit-riverfront-development/79124214/>