

Bridgeport on hunt for developers

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BRIDGEPORT — Challenged city on Long Island Sound trying to make a comeback is looking for developer for multi-use complex on more than 10 acres across from two entertainment venues.

That's the message Bridgeport sent out Monday, announcing its request for qualifications for the former Pequonnock housing site, across from the Arena and the Ballpark at Harbor Yard. The property has the potential for more than two million square feet of development, Mayor John M. Fabrizi said while making the announcement in the Ballpark's clubroom. "I think that's huge for downtown Bridgeport," he said in describing the hoped-for mix of restaurants, cafes, sports bars and retail shops at street level with either a hotel or residential towers. He's also hoping for a zoning change that would allow for 50-story buildings along the waterfront, instead of the 25 stories now permitted.

"The time is right & there is very strong development interest in the city of Bridgeport," he said of the site plans, the first to come out of the in-development Bridgeport Downtown Plan.

An RFQ is the first step in finding a developer for the site, now mainly used as parking lots for the Harbor Yard complex. The Bridgeport Economic Resource Center will manage the process for the city and the Bridgeport Housing Authority, which owns the site.

BERC's timeline calls for a final request for proposal ready by late February, an April 25, 2007, due date for the developers' RFPs and developer selection in mid-May, said President Kevin Nunn. In addition to advertisements in newspapers and trade publications, Nunn is sending details of the RFQ to more than 240 developers and other professionals.

Any site plans would have to include 400 dedicated parking spaces for the arena and ballpark, Nunn said — probably in the form of a parking garage. Nunn estimated the cost of the whole project as starting at between \$200 million and \$250 million. "That's a wild guess," but the project will cost at least that much, he said.

Representatives from the Regional Plan Association, which is developing the downtown plan with Phillips Preiss Shapiro Associates, said the Pequonnock development shouldn't take away from plans for Steel Point.

"They each have very different focuses," said David M. Kooris, an associate planner. The focus of Steel Point's early phase is retail, he said, while at Pequonnock, it is entertainment.

"The full build-out of each would require a bit of market-building" to make both work, he added.

Fabrizi, Nunn and RPA Vice President John Atkin described the development as similar to Camden Yards in Baltimore, redevelopment in Hoboken, N.J., the Sprint Center in Kansas City, Mo., and the City Center in White Plains, N.Y.

"The development of the Pequonnock site is paramount to achieving & a new and revitalized downtown," Atkin said. The RPA and PPSA expect to have the downtown master plan done by December; the Pequonnock development is a "lynchpin" in the plan.

Paul Timpanelli, president and chief executive of the Bridgeport Regional Business Council, called the RFQ a "wonderful, wonderful opportunity," what the city and business community have been searching and planning for.

"Our regional image, our statewide image, our national image, will begin to change," he said.

Mary-Jane Foster, chief executive officer for the Bridgeport Bluefish ownership group, acknowledged the team will be inconvenienced by construction across the street, and the loss of its parking lots until a structure is built.

But, "We'll just work through them. A season's inconvenience for all of this wonderful new opportunity is not a lot."