Chicago seeks big-idea proposals for Michael Reese Hospital site in Bronzeville

By Jeff Cohen - Contact Reporter
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Once the planned location for Chicago's Olympic village and later fenced as a possible home for the Obama presidential library, the former site of Michael Reese Hospital sat on a recent morning as just a wind-swept field on the lakefront with brown weeds poking up through a layer of fresh snow.

But attention has turned in earnest to redeveloping the nearly 50 acres of lots just south of McCormick Place. The city this fall put out a request for proposals from developers for turning unused land that also includes nearby truck yards into a Chicago jewel.

“The objective of this RFP is redevelopment of underutilized land in a manner which adds vibrancy to Chicago’s south lakefront communities, particularly Bronzeville,” a city document states. “The city and MPEA [Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority] are open to a range of uses, including commercial, institutional, tourism, entertainment, sports and recreational facilities, and residential.”

And Bronzeville will be watching very closely. Some community leaders already worry the city might not be thinking big enough, saying they don’t want to see another collection of residential high-rises that don’t provide jobs or attract visitors.

“This should be presented as Chicago’s national or international piece of real estate — it’s Chicago’s filet mignon on the lakefront,” said Paula Robinson of the Bronzeville Community Development Partnership. “We can get a dialogue going. In the 21st century, what is going to keep Bronzeville from just being a bedroom community? Where are jobs and industry going to come from this area? Work has disappeared.”

Exactly what form that dialogue takes remains to be seen. Robinson said her group is deciding this month whether to partner with a developer and submit its ideas or how to otherwise communicate its desire.

The partnership is interested in at least part of the site being set aside for green manufacturing or an energy innovation facility that can tap into Chicago’s high-tech future. The city last year opened the Digital Manufacturing and Design Innovation Institute on Goose Island, for example, and Robinson said Bronzeville and the South Side don’t want to be left out.

Robinson noted the city is feeling some pressure from the way the site was acquired in anticipation it might host the 2016 Olympics. The Daley administration inked an agreement to pay $6 million per acre for the Michael Reese property in 2008, and had planned to redevelop it as a builder that would construct an athlete’s village.

More than 20 high-rise projects might have been erected there and turned into mixed-income housing once the Games ended.

The Games, of course, were held this summer in Rio de Janeiro, leaving City Hall holding the property and staring at potentially paying tens of millions of dollars in interest payments over the next several years.

The city and Mayor Rahm Emanuel shouldn’t take the “easy step” of settling for thousands of units of housing just because the bill is coming due, Robinson said.

“I want to see more from our city than that,” she said. “I want to see more from Rahm than that.”

The RFP for the site includes the Michael Reese lots, the city-owned truck yards just to the east and four privately owned lots to the north that include a McDonald’s restaurant near McCormick Place — for a total of more than 50 acres. Responses to the city’s request are due Feb. 22 and April 6 and have been set as a date to select a developer.

City officials have said interest in the site has been high, and that steps are being taken to minimize the risk of taxpayers footing a large bill. Some 20 “interested parties” have downloaded the RFP from the city’s website, officials said, while 100 attended a conference on Michael Reese, and dozens were on hand for a site visit last month.

City Planning Commissioner David Roitman said the city has been clear that it wants to see a vibrant mix of development that generates jobs, link the central part of the city to the Near South Side and create new connections to the lakefront.

“We want the highest-quality development possible — I agree with the community completely,” Roitman said in an interview with the Tribune. “We want a high-impact proposal.

“I do think this is an opportunity for developers to pool their resources and pool their strengths,” he said.

The size of the area suggests it could be developed in stages over time, Roitman said, and that a mix of uses could be seen beyond just residential. That could potentially include the kind of green manufacturing facility Robinson discussed, he said, depending on what plans are brought forward.

“That’s I think one of our priorities as a city — how to create more high-tech jobs and more 21st-century jobs,” Roitman said.

Anything that eventually winds up in the planning stages for the site will be subject to a high level of public scrutiny in the review process, city officials have said. And the city held a series of community meetings in 2012 and 2013 to gather input from residents.

The alderman for the area, Sophia King, 4th, did not immediately respond to messages seeking comment, though her staff said she already had hosted one meeting on the site.

King has a message on her website that the community will be engaged during the process.

“This site has incredible potential to create new jobs and drive economic growth in the 4th Ward and community input is an important part of that vision,” King’s statement said.

Part of the city’s plan at the site includes the possibility of removing the Michael Reese site and surrounding lots from the Bronzeville tax increment financing district to create its own TIF, which city officials said would be used to address infrastructure needs there. The city already has removed McCormick Place from the Bronzeville planning area after the Tribune reported last year that the vast majority of spending of TIF funds earmarked for Bronzeville was going to projects near the convention center.

Residents said they are less concerned about which TIF pool money from the area than they are about what ultimately is built.

“Residents typically have no say whatsoever anyway on how the public can leverage TIFs,” said Mel Monroe, the owner of a Midtown Avenue bed and breakfast in Bronzeville and a sometime aldermanic candidate. “I’ve been here 14 years and no one has ever come in and said, ‘We’re going to use TIF money on this or we’re going to use TIF money on that.’”

Monroe has long called on the city to bring more attractions to the historic neighborhood. He said increasing tourism would help small business owners such as himself and hopefully mushroom into more private development. Even a casino would be welcomed on the lakefront as far as he’s concerned, he said, although the city has said that is not on the radar in this round of planning.

“It could be a conglomeration of restaurants and hotels and things,” Monroe said.

“Anything that brings traffic on our side of town,” jooen@chicagotribune.com