

# PRESS-REGISTER

## New plan offered for county courthouse property

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Mobile County commissioners are expected to hire a consultant to help determine what to do with the downtown Mobile property where the old county courthouse sat.

And despite a new attempt at a compromise, the old courthouse land still appears to be a thorn in the relationship between the city and county governments.

County Commissioner Mike Dean at a Thursday work session proposed that the development now include the adjacent courthouse annex building, which would make it possible to include a park in the project, as originally devised.

The old courthouse, which sat west of Royal Street between Government and Church streets, was torn down earlier this year.

The annex sits on the west side of the old courthouse lot. The annex is being partially demolished right now, and the county planned to enlarge it from one story to a four-story building to house Mobile County Probate Court.

Dean's idea is that the annex be spread over the north half of the old

courthouse land to create a 12-story building that would include a parking deck, the probate court offices, retail space and condominiums.

The south part of the courthouse site would then be used for a park.

Commissioners Stephen Nodine and Juan Chastang agreed that the annex building should be considered by the consultant.

The county plans to vote Monday to contract with Stainback Public/Private Real Estate to create a conceptual drawing of a multi-use development at the site. The contract would total about \$85,000, county attorney Jay Ross said.

Dean said his proposal is meant to be a compromise between the condo-and-retail development that Chastang has pushed and a park that Mobile Mayor Sam Jones wants and that the county commission agreed to in 2002 when Jones and Dean were members and Nodine and Chastang were not.

Dean also said that if government offices are part of a private development, the county could save millions of taxpayer dollars that it would have cost to erect the probate court building.

"I think it's a win-win," Dean said.

On Thursday, Jones said he would support building the annex higher to include retail and condominiums with the probate court offices but would not be in favor of extending the building all the way to Royal Street.

"That would defeat the purpose of having an open space," Jones said. "You'd have a park behind a huge building that no one could see or enjoy."

Jones has repeatedly said he wants the county to stick with a plan to build a park with a "dynamic water display" to show off several nearby buildings, such as the Museum of Mobile, the Fort Conde Museum and Welcome Center, the Gulf Coast Exploreum Science Center, and the historic Christ Church Cathedral. The mayor has said he would like the park to have a Mardi Gras theme.

Jones has also said that a park would be a good place for people to gather when taking group trips to the Exploreum.

The mayor said he's planning to give a presentation to the commission to convince them that a park is needed in that space.

During Thursday's meeting, Nodine said that despite Jones' protesta-

tions, “I believe in the sovereignty of the county” when it comes to what to do with the land.

The old courthouse site is not the only thing prickling the city-county relationship lately. Last week, the county fired longtime lobbyist Beth Marietta Lyons, who also lobbies for the city of Mobile, because, commissioners said, they did not want the same person representing both governments.

Jones said then that the move hurt the partnership between the governments, and he reiterated those comments when talking about the courthouse site on Thursday.

“For almost 19 years now, I have worked with everybody in city and county government to develop and build partnerships in the best

interest of what we’re all trying to achieve,” Jones said. “What I’ve seen lately is certainly not in that spirit.”

Chastang originally proposed a condominium development on the old courthouse land during his State of the County speech in April.

In August, Chastang invited John Stainback of Stainback Public/Private Real Estate to give commissioners a presentation on what to do with the land.

At that time, Stainback described other projects his company has done, such as renovating a school in Washington, D.C. That development included an apartment complex on the grounds, creating revenue for the school.

Another project in downtown Chapel Hill, N.C., turned unused city property and an old parking garage into apartments and park space.

Stainback said his company would lead Mobile County officials through the process of deciding what they want on the land, determining whether such a development is feasible, creating a design and putting together possible financial plans.

Only then would the county search for a developer, commissioners have said.

Stainback said local governments often hire a developer too early in public-private partnerships and lose some control over the project.