

Keep focus on the river Ensure public access in plan to renew downtown Fort Myers

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Give us a downtown we can live with.

Live.

Like in ordinary, everyday life. Like, too, in lives made extraordinary by new opportunities and new horizons.

The sort of life that builds us up, makes us smile, involves friendships and collegial bonding, allows us to earn our living, gives us a place to commune with the wonder that is the Caloosahatchee River, meets our needs for recreation ranging from shopping to the arts and allows for the sort of different experiences visiting convention groups might bring.

This would be a downtown with fine and casual dining and fine and casual shopping both in the present business parameters and right along the river. Such shops need to be there with unlimited access, like a small town's main street, with a promenade along the river.

This would be a downtown where our children can watch as anglers and day sailors launch their boats.

We need to preserve the boat ramp.

This would be a downtown with facilities for out of area groups that can come to convene, bringing us not only revenue, but also new experiences.

Wouldn't it be grand, say, if a cultural or ethnic group stopped by with its traditions and demonstrations?

The possibilities are limitless if we had enough hotel space and an enhanced Harborside Events Center.

This would be a downtown where if we stopped by in the evening, there would likely be entertainment beyond the pubs and bars. A bandshell or the like is more than appropriate.

This would be a downtown where the river is, as everyone seems to agree, the main attraction, which means we do not block views of the river with high-rise condos and any hotel is so strategically placed, so architecturally interesting that it becomes part of the riverscape.

This would be a downtown where living means work, play and a place of residence. How about some workforce (read: affordable) housing?

We bring all of this up now because the redevelopment of downtown - appropriately just renamed The River District by the Fort Myers Redevelopment Agency - is once again up for grabs.

WCI Communities on Monday backed out of the project, sort of. The big development company said it would like to be invited back in after the nature of the development undergoes more study.

There is a bit of a debate about that developing.

Mayor Jim Humphrey welcomes WCI's re-emergence with open arms.

Councilman Mike Flanders wants to begin talking with the firm that came in second when WCI was picked: Antaramian Development Corp.

Frankly, we think the Antaramian plan came closer to our idea of a downtown for all of the people than did WCI's.

But let us not pick a developer right now.

Flanders points out that the original call for proposals said the city "shall" go to the next applicant should negotiations with the first one break down.

Humphrey, oddly, says "shall" doesn't mean "shall" in this case.

This should not be a battle of legal terminology. This should be a battle of ideas.

And the idea that must prevail is the one that makes the downtown/riverfront accessible, usable and visible to the greatest number of us, and of our children and of our grandchildren.

City Council is going to begin new discussions, with a yet-to-be scheduled workshop on changes the council members wanted WCI to make.

We would hope the discussions go beyond those limits. They need to be wide ranging and spirited.