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Independence Regional Health Center could rise again as business incubator

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A landmark of northwest Independence, idle for more than a year, might still have a future.

The now-closed Independence Regional Health Center would become a business incubator under plans being considered by city officials. Such "incubators" often offer different kinds of help to individuals seeking to start or grow small businesses.

If approved, the incubator on the approximately 16-acre site would be one of the largest in the nation, at least in terms of square footage, said Tom Lesnak, president of the Independence Council for Economic Development.

Yet the deal is a long way from being done.

The proposal hinges in part on money set aside in a tax-increment-financing plan approved in 2004 to help fund redevelopment of two closed Independence hospitals. The plans also must pass muster with the Independence City Council.

Still, such an incubator represents an especially appropriate use for the facility, said David Edwards, a Lee's Summit Realtor who is developing the proposal.

"We want to be a catalyst of redevelopment in western Independence," he said. "To do that we wanted to bring in businesses.

"We felt this was the best way to do it."

The incubator would represent new life for the former hospital at 1509 W. Truman Road that for decades had represented an economic and emotional anchor in northwest Independence.

Many area residents have personal connections with the hospital, which dated to 1909. Further, many were upset when HCA Midwest closed the facility last year upon the opening of the new Centerpoint Medical Center in eastern Independence.

The old hospital has been idle since.

The proposed new use would be especially appropriate given the current economic climate, Lesnak said.

"A lot of people are going to be looking to do something different, and there will be a large number of people who will be starting home-based businesses," he said.

At the incubator those seeking to start small businesses could find help that they might not have had access to on their own, Lesnak said. That could include help with accounting and legal services, as well as the use of basic office hardware such as copiers and fax machines.

Such a facility does not currently exist in eastern Jackson County, he said.

"In fact, there is really nothing in the Kansas City metro area of the magnitude of what we are talking about," he said.

What's still unknown is how much financial assistance the proposed development might receive. The proposal involves significant upgrades, as well as alterations of the hospital complex. That includes demolition of part of the complex, Edwards said.

"What people consider the original hospital building would be coming down," Edwards said.

Other expenses would be upgrades of the facility's plumbing and electrical systems.

In the 2004 TIF agreement, approximately \$12 million was set aside that could be used to help renovate the facilities. The business incubator plans are contingent upon receiving a percentage of the TIF money available, Edwards said.

"The project will not happen without the use of those TIF dollars," he added.

City officials also must consider whether any TIF money should be set aside for any renovation of the former Medical Center of Independence at 17203 E. 23rd St.

The re-use of former hospital buildings has its own challenges and opportunities.

Sometimes such facilities are considered candidates for senior-housing complexes. But, given the location of The Groves seniors community just north across Truman Road from Independence Regional, that didn't seem the most appropriate use for the facility, Edwards said.

But the former hospital is unique in that it already has a kitchen and laboratory facilities that would be appropriate for food service or life science start-ups, Edwards said.

The former hospital's chapel would be converted into a conference center, with stage lighting and a sound system, Edwards said. There also is an auditorium on the lower level that could be made available for public events.

The approval process would start with a review by the city's TIF committee.

"The committee would review what we have proposed, listen to our presentation and then hopefully make a recommendation to the City Council," Edwards said.

The committee is an advisory body to the City Council; its recommendations are not binding.

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