

Panel supports both TIF plans

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The Owensboro-Daviess County Tourist Commission went on record Tuesday as supporting tourism development throughout Daviess County, not just in downtown Owensboro.

That's a change from recent months, when the board said repeatedly that an arena/indoor events center and convention center need to be part of downtown redevelopment.

But the Owensboro City Commission recently backed a plan to build an arena, convention center and a hotel in Gateway Commons, a 200-acre development being planned on Kentucky 54.

At the same time, Mayor Tom Watson and the city commissioners said they support downtown redevelopment.

But Gulfstream Enterprises, which is planning Gateway Commons, offers a way to pay for public projects through a tax increment financing district -- if the state approves the plan, they said.

The idea is for taxes on the \$210 million private development and its employees to be used to pay for \$180 million worth of public projects.

At the same time, the Downtown Development Corp. is seeking developers to finance public improvements -- including a baseball stadium/outdoor events center -- near the riverfront.

"We support development that drives tourism, wherever it may be," board member Jan Kinsey, assistant general manager of the Executive Inn Rivermont, said in making the motion to back the Kentucky 54 project as well as the downtown plan.

City Commissioner Cathy Armour, who also serves on the tourism board, suggested that the tourist commission meet with Tom Hazinski, a Chicago-based consultant with HVS International, who was hired by the city to help with TIF negotiations.

"He is looking at the Kentucky 54 development and at the downtown footprint," Armour said. "I would love to see the tourist commission become part of the process. It would make it more public."

"It's a good thing for the community to be involved and informed," said Carole MacQuarrie, a tourism board member who is co-owner of Colby's Fine Foods and Spirits and Colby's Deli & Cafe.

"There are very few public-private partnerships in the community," Armour said. "I don't think we realized how much of an issue this would be."

Kinsey said if the tourist commission can help the downtown group become more organized, developers might be attracted to that project as well.

Armour said the city can't vote to create a TIF downtown until developers are involved.

"Downtown is not close to being ready," she said.

In other business, the board:

-- Voted to extend Burley Phelan's contract through Oct. 1.

Phelan, the commission's executive director, announced plans to retire Aug. 1.

But the board still hasn't hired his replacement.

"We think we'll have an announcement in the next two weeks," Chairman Larry Mayfield, executive vice president of Independence Bank, said after the meeting. "But we asked Burley to stay on two more months" to help with the transition.

-- Recognized Donna Risley's contributions to the local hospitality industry.

In 2004, Risley, the commission's part-time special projects director, created a "tourism ambassador" program, using volunteers to assist with festivals and conventions.

Risley is retiring.