

Dear Editor:

Over the last several weeks, many articles and letters have appeared in the Daily Press concerning the potential development of Escanaba's Ludington Park and the North Shore of Escanaba. The articles and letters include several points which need to be clarified for the good of the community. First, no decision has been made publicly or privately about any of the concepts or merits of any potential development including the Neumeir/Blomquist concept. Second, all concepts or proposals concerning waterfront development must be in compliance with the Escanaba Master Plan and third, a great deal of public discussion and debate on potential development concepts must take place. Keeping those three points in mind, I would like to provide your readers with a history of what has taken place to date and what our citizens can expect as this discussion moves forward.

In 2006, the City of Escanaba went through a planning process to create a community Master Plan that would be used to help manage the future growth of Escanaba and work as a tool that would shape and maintain the community as growth occurs. To be successful, it was critical that the Master Plan reflect the views and opinions of those who would be most impacted, the residents.

Escanaba's Master Plan includes under economic development, a mid-term goal to improve the North Shore of Escanaba. The North Shore is defined to be the property located from the Waterplant/Muesum area north to the Escanaba River. The targeted waterfront was identified throughout the Master Planning process as an underutilized resource which could be revitalized using a logical segmentation of the waterfront and includes a series of potential uses, such as waterfront related retail, commercial, lodging, residential and industrial. However, before that sort of development can occur, the City understands the need to garner public input and support. Furthermore, the City understands the need to partner with waterfront property owners in creating public-private partnerships as part of the redevelopment process.

If a resident were to read the Escanaba Master Plan, they would see the Council instructed the Planning Commission to look into revisions of the City Zoning Ordinance including possible creation of a waterfront district, which promotes mixed-use development, waterfront-related commercial and industrial activities. The Planning Commission was also instructed to concentrate initial efforts on that portion of the waterfront which is located in the "Downtown Waterfront" area. This would include consummating an agreement with property owners to redevelop the site within the context of a public-private partnership where the property owners maintain a vested interest in the property, and the community brings to the redevelopment process technical assistance, possible tax credits, possible tax increment financing, possible Brownfield incentives and access to state and federal grant programs.

Understanding the importance of community input and buy-in, the Administration, Planning Commission and City Council recognizes all residents and interested parties must have fair and equitable representation on this important planning process. To that end, a North Shore Redevelopment Leadership Committee was formed. This committee is comprised of 2 City Council Members (Gilbert Cheves and Patricia Baribeau), 2 Planning Commissioners (Stephen Buckbee and Bridgette Jaakola), 2 DDA Trustees (Scott Kwarciany and Peggy Schumann) and City Administrators (James O'Toole, Bill Farrell and Roger Good). This group serves as the eyes and ears in the planning process and as a sounding board to the various City boards and commissions, Planning Commission and City Council. In other words, this group is charged with ensuring all aspects of community interests are represented. As this planning process and discussion evolves, additional members will be added from other boards and commissions such as the Brownfield Authority, Electrical Advisory Committee, Traffic Safety Committee and others.

In February 2008, City Administration, along with the Planning Commission, began discussing the "work plan" that would be used to formulate a citizen-based process which would garner public input and support. We discussed the initial elements that would need research, including the identification of issues that could present opportunities and constraints. Basic research and mapping of the waterfront elements were identified as needing to be done; including continued evaluation of current conditions, land use, infrastructure, economic and hazardous situations. We also wanted to insure that any potential proposal or concept that is considered be designed to provide future growth and development that integrates well with adjacent uses, minimizes nuisance impacts on adjoining parcels and the community at large, ensures safe and functional traffic access and parking and is sensitive to environmental conditions and natural resources. Furthermore, we wanted to insure that all concepts, ideas and proposals adhered to the following principles of smart growth:

Each Proposal/Concept must:

1. Create a range of mixed land use opportunities which create a variety of choices and opportunities.
2. Create a walkable project.
3. Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration and community participation rather than conflict in development decisions.
4. Foster distinctive, attractive projects with a strong sense of place.
5. Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost effective.
6. Mix land uses (residential, commercial and industrial).
7. Preserve open space, lake access, natural beauty and critical environmental areas.
8. Provide a variety of transportation choices, including pedestrian friendly layouts.

9. Strengthen and direct development towards the concepts and vision of the Escanaba Master Plan. Maintain the unique sense of place in Escanaba by respecting local culture and natural environmental features.
10. Provide staged and managed growth by taking advantage of compact building design and form based zoning philosophy.

Over the next 60 to 90 days, a request for proposal to retain professional services for the development of a strategic planning effort will be created. The proposal will outline a logical planning process with very specific performance targets relating to the Master Plan, the Zoning Ordinance, a description of planning implementation methods and an action plan model, which must demonstrate continuous, measurable improvements in the shaping of the North Shore. The proposal will also solicit innovative recommendations, suggestions and ideas for the development of the targeted area, to include a viable proposal to avoid conflicts between the plan, waterfront property owners and the community in general. Another performance target that will be in the RFP is how the vendor will include public participation in the process so as to avoid conflicts in any development decisions. In simple terms, we will want to know what the residents of Escanaba expect our waterfront to be and how we as a community will get there.

Once an RFP is finalized, the proposals will be sent out to various planning, engineering and architectural firms so that they can submit their planning process concepts. Once received, proposals will be reviewed and scored using a written review process. Scoring will be based on items such as how well the vendor stated objectives and if those objectives are specific, realistic and measurable. Proposals will also be rated on how public input and information will be gathered, what activities will be conducted to achieve stated objectives, how the vendor will determine the effectiveness of its plan and the benefits to the community. Additionally, scoring will be made on what partners, if any, will be used, project timing to include start and completion dates, budget and cost justifications and a description of project personnel who will be assigned to the project.

Once the scoring is completed, the top 3 vendors will be invited to participate in an open interview at a Planning Commission meeting. In this interview, the vendors will make their “pitch” as to why the City should select their firm for the project and what their vision is for the ongoing discussions between what the community wants and the resources available to get there. Once the interviews are completed, a recommendation from the Planning Commission will be forwarded to the City Council.

Should the City Council retain a vendor, the formal strategic planning process will begin as outlined in the recommended proposal. Again, this will involve many open public forums and extensive outreach into the community. Upon completion of the Strategic Plan, a final presentation to the Planning Commission will be conducted and a recommendation to proceed (or not) will be made to the City Council. Assuming the Council approves and adopts the plan, the recommendations of the plan will be

followed and will include a competitive bidding process and a vote of the people if any part of the strategic plan suggests the sale or lease of any part of Ludington Park or the Municipal Dock Park.

In closing, I urge all residents of Escanaba to participate in the planning process and the upcoming public forums. Decisions made and initiatives taken over the next few years will be critical to the future of Escanaba. As previously stated, any plan that may move forward will be openly discussed and debated. Any decision either for or against any proposal or concept will be done in full public view. And most importantly, the desires and opinions of the residents will be considered to insure community and stakeholder collaboration and participation rather than conflict in development decisions.

Respectfully Submitted,

James V. O'Toole  
City Manager  
Escanaba