

West Palm's plan for library, city hall debated

More retail space needed to revive Clematis and its businesses, says the Downtown Development Authority.

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WEST PALM BEACH — Worried that early plans for the new city hall and library would leave a gaping hole in Clematis Street's retail strip, members of the Downtown Development Authority board on Thursday pressed the designers to try to add more shops to the project.

They said not including more retail than the two small shops now planned would be a wasted opportunity for the downtown businesses already desperate for customers.

Re-energizing Clematis Street was one of the main rationales city officials trumpeted

for building the project in the block at the northwest corner of Clematis Street and Dixie Highway. Plans for extensive private development on the site, which would have offset some of the taxpayer cost, have already been abandoned by city officials and the project designers they hired.

The authority board favors having "City Center" built as soon as possible to awaken a block all but dead for 10 years, and called a press conference two weeks ago to announce its support.

But they said a city hall and library would not necessarily draw people who would buy things in Clematis Street shops. Many of them will likely go straight to the city hall and library from the garage without even walking on the street, they say.

"Having more retail frontage on Clematis Street is something the board hasn't dropped," said authority board member Rob Samuels, who owns Provident Jewelry on

Clematis Street. "We're still interested in having more of it."

Jonathan Satter, a West Palm Beach real estate broker, said building new retail might solve a long-standing problem on Clematis Street. It's short on smaller spaces with rents affordable to small businesses.

"This, I believe, is an opportunity to incubate small retailers," he said. "Unless a project like this attacks it, we'll never be able to provide it."

Clematis Street must have retail on the ground floor under the city's current downtown master plan. But the plan is now under review and portions of it will likely be revised.

Steven Grigg, president of Washington-based Republic Properties, the master developer of City Center, said plans were not iron-clad and the authority's request would be considered.

"We want to very much draw people from

the waterfront, this direction," he said.

But the site is just one city block and every square foot is at a premium. Going taller isn't a good option because then the buildings' heights won't fit with the rest of the street, Grigg said. Besides, ground-floor space is the most coveted of all, designers say.

Plans do include a library cafe and a shop in the Palm Beach Photographic Centre, both of which would sit on Clematis, but that would still leave most of Clematis without shops. Architect Young Song noted that the buildings along Clematis would include windows and a covered walkway at the ground level, which will be appealing for pedestrians.

Authority Executive Director Peter Armatto said visual appeal isn't enough. But he said he was optimistic that architects would find a way to include at least a few more storefronts.

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