

Atlantic City Tourism District's Master Plan to focus on short-term projects

By EMILY PREVITI Staff Writer

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ATLANTIC CITY - The city's forthcoming Tourism District Master Plan is expected to focus on the Boardwalk, South Inlet neighborhood and existing business districts along Atlantic and Pacific avenues, consultants said Thursday.

Bader Field, however, would not be aggressively targeted for development under the plan.

Representatives from Jones Lang LaSalle and The Jerde Partnership publicly disclosed details about the plan for the first time during a presentation to the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority board and a cramped public seating area overflowing with residents and other stakeholders.

"Our effort is to deal with those areas we think should be more near-term fixes," said Richard W. Poulos, executive vice president of Jerde.

The plan calls for a 180-foot-tall wind sculpture - the first of its kind - near Revel Entertainment Group in the South Inlet neighborhood. Expanded green technology also was discussed.

For now, Poulos and his colleagues are shying away from further development at Bader Field - a 142-acre former municipal airport whose development potential with a history of controversy Poulos said he was not aware of. Poulos said the site should continue to host events such as the Dave Matthews Band Caravan and other festivals staged there last summer, while the city and CRDA target investment recruitment and redevelopment efforts in the heart of the city.

"There's only so much investment money that may be willing to come in here. I mean, I hope there's a lot once we begin to sell what the city could be," Poulos said. "But the problem is that, experientially, when someone comes here - it's a mess. So that's what we're trying to fix."

The CRDA awarded an \$800,000 contract to the companies to overhaul resort development plans by the Feb. 1 deadline assigned by state law - one Poulos said the team expects to beat.

"There's concern about getting this master plan done, but it has to fit into plans already there," said community activist Steve Young, who had been lobbying the CRDA for more than a decade to redevelop Kentucky Avenue, a formerly renowned music and nightlife district that is now lined mainly with vacant lots, dilapidated structures and the backs or sides of buildings.

Young and a few partners formed Polaris Development Group and, with the help of a \$200,000 CRDA grant, came up with a redevelopment plan that calls for museums, restaurants and shops that pay homage to and, to a certain extent, recreate the glittering strip of clubs, lounges and dance halls that once drew hordes of tourists.

"We all need to be partners in this," CRDA Deputy Director Susan Ney Thompson said. "We're going to need your help, so your involvement is going to be critical. This is a status briefing for where we are right now. We have shared some ideas. As we move forward, we'll be drilling down into the implementation process."

Atlantic City Arts Commission members MK Thomas and Peachy Lee also expressed concerns about the CRDA and planning consultants' failure to involve them, despite requests at community forums held nearly a year ago before the agency launched the Tourism District, and also at a feedback session held three weeks ago at the Atlantic City Convention Center.

"I think what you're doing is wonderful, but ... we're not involved. That's why we're here," Lee said. "It feels like you've forgotten about us. Nobody has contacted us like you said you would."

In Atlantic City, developing arts and culture "should go on forever," Poulos said.

"The question is, when do you start? And we've started ... (but) implementing some of these objectives can't happen without some major real estate move, and real estate in this town is fairly complex," he said.

Jason Forslund, 25, of Ventnor, stressed that the rest of the master plan needs to include initiatives that are not focused exclusively on tourists. Forslund, who manages a tattoo shop in Atlantic City, and his roommates have been working on a plan for a skateboard park. He said they already have garnered support from a seasoned park consultant and nonprofit foundation with local ties - and connections to major sponsors - that has offered to help as soon as they are ready. That could help round out what's available to people during their down time by providing an alternative to gambling and casino bars and nightclubs, he said.

"I've been a member of the South Jersey community for my entire life, and I'm searching for reasons to stay. Most of the people I know graduated college and leave and never come back," Forslund said. "We have the beach, we have world-class waves, incredible people. We're two hours from the mountains, two hours from major cities, but for some reason, nobody wants to stay here. So this is all great, and I'm not a politician. But when things matter to people, when (they) really, really care about something - money, jobs, funding, financing, whatever, who cares? There's nothing here to care about. I don't care about lasers, I don't care about a light show. It doesn't resonate."

Recommendations revealed: Atlantic City Tourism District Mater Plan

Expand Gardner's Basin in keeping with the existing marine and education themes, maybe host an oceanic research facility.

Encourage business to develop pavilions mixing attractions that are strictly for entertainment with those that are educational along the ocean side of the Boardwalk.

Build a 180-foot-tall wind sculpture — the first of its kind — near Revel Entertainment Group's casino in the city's South Inlet neighborhood and expand on that green technology trend to appeal to younger generations.

Re-establish a trolley along Atlantic Avenue as more of a novelty and attraction than a high-speed transit system.

Move forward with relighting Boardwalk Hall's dome and add laser lights at key points along the skyline.

Create a resort town atmosphere on Atlantic, the city's Main Street. Suggested steps so far: organize parades or other events daily, encouraged development that mixes residential and commercial uses, improve the appeal of existing shops by removing metal bars from windows and minimizing other security infrastructure that detracts from the resort environment.

Untangle the highway maze people must navigate to get to the Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa. Beyond that, the Marina District works.

Continue expanding the Special Improvement Division's Boardwalk Ambassador program to include greeters in other areas of the city.

Camouflage adult-oriented businesses at their existing locations instead of going with an idea last summer to put them in one area — a 'red light district' of sorts.

The Jerde Partnership Inc. Executive Vice President Richard W. Poulos and Director of Project Design John Simones

Contact Emily Previti:

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