

Gateway to Austin
Visitors Center Committee
Friday, August 5, 2016
Town Center Conference Room

The meeting was called to order at 1:00 p.m.

Members present: Mike Ankeny, Craig Clark, John Gray, Steven Lang, Nancy Schnable, Thomas Steihm and John Wright

Absent: Jon Erickson and Mike Hanson

Vision 2020 Steering Committee representatives: Greg Siems and Sheri Dankert

RSP Architects representatives: Jeremy Mayberg, Ben Lindau and George Brophy

The meeting started with a review of the Gateway to Austin vision and the Visitors Center goal, objective, description of objective/project, deadline, and the challenges going forward. All fore mentioned were established approximately 2 years ago.

At the last meeting of April 27 there was some serious discussion as to whether or not the site directly south of the current Hy-Vee made sense even though the main focus of the Gateway to Austin is the I-90 corridor. Was it really the best location for a Visitors Center in promoting Austin and the surrounding area? It was agreed that we needed to work with RSP Architects in evaluating various options and come to a final decision on a site so that we could move forward with this project.

RSP presented a Site Selection Evaluation Matrix, which looked at 3 sites and was discussed at length, taking into consideration the following criteria.

1. Visibility and Accessibility

This criterion has different meanings when looking at an I-90 versus a downtown location.

The I-90 site would be visible from I-90 especially if there was an appealing photo op attraction that was unique to the community and could be seen from the interstate (i.e. large Sir-Can-A-Lot statue). Accessibility from the interstate is conducive from either the west or the east with exit ramps in either direction; however, signage would need to be in place directing the traveler from the exits around north to 18th Ave. NW and then back to 8th Street NW south. Another consideration is the traffic around the apartment building adjacent to the site we have been looking at.

The downtown location would have visibility and accessibility due to the SPAM Museum. Ideally the Visitors Center would need to be located near, within walking distance, of the SPAM Museum. Wayfinding signage will be in place on the main roads leading to downtown.

2. Uniqueness and Retail

Retail in the area of 18th Avenue NW is mainly box stores or chain restaurants whereas downtown has a number of unique hometown retail and restaurants.

3. Overall Audience

The question was asked as to how many travelers the Visitors Center could potentially attract from the interstate? RSP had looked at some data, a couple of years ago, from similar Visitor Centers in Minnesota and Iowa. Bottom line is there are no guarantees of how many travelers the I-90 site could capture. In addition, realistically how many travelers once stopping at this site would be willing to proceed downtown?

Since the opening of the SPAM Museum the traffic downtown has been well documented. The SPAM Museum will attract approximately 125,000 visitors annually. These visitors have already made the commitment to see our city.

4. Cost Effectiveness

a. City owned sites

It was brought to our attention that the City of Austin has purchased the Ville Bar and is in the process of purchasing the Paradise Island Bar located on 2nd Avenue NE, directly across the street north from the Law Enforcement Center. It is felt we could work with the City to acquire this property and repurpose the building, which assumedly would be more cost effective than building new. In addition, the City owns the parking lot directly across to the north of the SPAM Museum. Could this possibly be a site for a new building, which would be extremely accessible to visitors to the SPAM Museum.

b. Cost to repurpose vs new build

As a general rule it is less costly to repurpose an existing building then to build new. An unknown is the condition of the structure of the building. With repurposing a building the configuration of the interior might not meet ideal programming needs.

5. Availability

The I-90 site would not be available for any kind of construction until the Austin Port Authority takes ownership of the property, which looks like late spring or early summer of 2017.

The City owned property and those buildings that are for sale in the downtown area would have immediate access.

We also discussed the effects of location in supporting other Vision 2020 initiatives. The move downtown would strongly support Destination Downtown but also affect Community Pride & Spirit and Business & Economic Development.

After much discussion it was a unanimously agreed to change our focus for creating a Visitors Center from the Hy-Vee site to the downtown location in the proximity of the SPAM Museum (i.e. main street). The downtown site takes advantage of existing infrastructure, builds on an

effort to redevelop downtown Austin, takes advantage of a number of local attractions, and conceivably the lowest cost option.

The Austin Convention and Visitors Bureau is still very much interested in locating to and managing a Visitors Center. Obviously, an operational budget would need to be agreed upon among all parties involved. They do have a 2 year lease with US Bank, which takes them to the summer of 2018.

Our action step in moving forward is to research the various properties available downtown.

Once the above action step is completed a meeting will be scheduled to discuss site options and the pros and cons of each (i.e. proximity to SPAM Museum, square footage, availability, cost, etc.). If a decision is made on a site then we can proceed to discuss programming needs.

Meeting adjourned at 2:45 p.m.

Respectfully submitted

John J. Gray Jr., Chair