

HYDE PARK

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HERALD

Drs. Hospital, take 2

Developer wants community input for new plan

By KATE HAWLEY
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After tabling plans to redevelop the former Doctors Hospital for nearly a year, Ald. Leslie Hairston (5th) told a packed meeting Tuesday, Aug. 5, that developer White Lodging Services Corp. has agreed to restart the project, this time taking more of the community's wishes into account.

"We're talking about putting together a whole package that says, 'This is how we do it in Hyde Park,'" Hairston told Scott Travis, vice president of development for White Lodging, at the meeting at Bret Harte Elementary School, 1556 E. 56th St.

"This is a learning opportunity for us," said Travis, who conceded that the Merrillville, Ind.-based White Lodging, which owns and operates 130 hotels nationwide, has little experience working with urban communities. "Hyde Park is



Marc Monaghan

Realtor Charlotte Vickstrom asks a question about White Lodging's proposal to build a hotel on the site of Doctor's Hospital.

a unique place, and people here want to be heard," he said.

White Lodging has previously clashed with some Hyde Park denizens, who expressed concern about a plan the company presented last summer to raze the

See **DOCTORS** on page 3

DOCTORS

from page 1

Doctors Hospital building and build two hotels on the site at 5800 S. Stony Island Ave.

Among the loudest objectors were preservationists, who wanted White Lodging to save the 1914 building, and a service-workers union, which charged that the company has a spotty labor record.

Hairston withdrew her support last year but said that she's since held several meetings that persuaded the developer to approach the community again.

The basic provisions of the original proposal remain, Travis told the crowd. White Lodging still wants to develop, own and operate two hotels. The company has a lease agreement with the University of Chicago, which bought the vacant hospital at auction for \$10.1 million in October 2006.

Under White Lodging's plan, a Marriott Hotel and a Fairfield Inn and Suites would together include 390 rooms, a full-service restaurant and 15,000 square feet of meeting and banquet space — about a \$70-million investment, Travis said.

But the glass-and-steel designs presented last summer by HOK Architects have been apparently scrapped, and White Lodging hasn't yet presented new designs. "They come to you with a blank slate," Hairston said, opening the floor to comments from the roughly 200 people who crowded into the school's sweltering gym.

The majority favored development on the land, with a good number of people voicing strong support for a hotel. Others asked for jobs and other community benefits as part of the deal.

In a shift from the neighborhood meetings held last year, many favored tearing down the building to make way for something new.

"It's the ugliest building I've ever seen," said one local woman. "I personally would be happy to have a nice, modern hotel there."

"That building is not reusable," argued another resident, Marcy Schlessinger, who serves on the executive committee of the South East Chicago Commission. The organization, which is funded by the university, determined in a 2002 study that the building couldn't be adapted for modern purposes, she said.

Preservation advocate Jim Peters, executive director of Landmarks Illinois, maintained

that the Colonial Revival building is not only salvageable, but that federal tax credits for historic preservation would make a hotel conversion cost-effective. He pointed out that preservationists have hired their own architect with a substantial portfolio of historic hotel conversions, who has shown how White Lodging's plan could include the existing structure.

That plan "absolutely was not feasible," Travis said, adding that the building, though designed by notable architects Richard E. Schmidt, Hugh M. Garden and Edgar D. Martin, was not one of the better examples of their work.

And he tossed another, previously unheard argument into the mix: the hospital has an ugly history of discrimination against African Americans, he said.

Rev. Dr. Leon Finney Jr., a longtime activist and president of the Woodlawn Community Development Corp., agreed, and put his support behind the hotel project. "If not a hotel, then what?" he said.

Others who attended the meeting renewed their earlier complaints about White Lodging's plan. Members of the union UNITE HERE Local 1 insisted on a meeting with Travis to discuss the company's labor policies, to which he agreed.

Neighbors contended that parking, light, airflow and views would be altered with the addition of the hotel buildings.

Jim Mann, a resident of the 5800 block of South Harper Avenue, said that given the commercial activity a new hotel would bring to the area, the city and the university should undertake a comprehensive planning process covering the area stretching from the west side of Stony Island Avenue to the Metra tracks and from 56th to 59th streets.

"It's a good idea," said Susan Campbell, associate vice president for community and government affairs at the university.

Other neighbors, including several from the nearby Vista Homes, 5834 S. Stony Island Ave., asked why White Lodging hasn't yet provided traffic and environmental studies.

Hairston asked Travis to bring those to the next community meeting about Doctors Hospital, which she said will likely be in mid-September. Farther down the road, White Lodging will show new renderings, she said.

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