

North Ridge bid favoured to retrofit warehouse

BY DAVID HUTTON, THE STARPHOENIX JANUARY 15, 2010

The city's administration is recommending North Ridge Development Corp. redevelop the 81-year-old Arthur Cook building in an office conversion expected to set the tone for a revitalized warehouse district.

The company received a higher score from a city review committee than Shift Developments, which proposed to create a hub for artists dubbed The Mint, and veteran builder Mid-West Development Corp., which planned to convert the building into its head office.

The recommendation, which requires city council approval Monday, includes a \$2.2-million purchase price for the 30,000-square-foot warehouse on the corner of 24th Street and Ontario Avenue and a long list of requirements, including environmental certification, cleaning the faded exterior brick and repairing the 24th Street entrance.

North Ridge plans to convert the building into an upscale office and commercial space, opening the ground floor to high-end retail and restaurants and the upper floors to architecture, engineering and design firms, with the basement geared more toward affordable office space, its proposal said.

The redevelopment is to be completed within a year and North Ridge is required to attempt to purchase adjacent land to develop a street-front cafe and patio.

Senior city planner Alan Wallace said price was not as important as environmental features, heritage preservation and the business plan.

"We were looking for uses that animated the street during the day and in the evening," Wallace said.

Shift Developments' Curtis Olson said he believes a two-week extension, granted in November, played to the favour of other bidders who were able to view his company's concept, which was published in a local magazine on the assumption the other proposals would already be filed.

"I was quite surprised to see how similar North Ridge's proposal was to ours," he said in an e-mail.

"The tenant mix they proposed includes creative and cultural industries, which Shift Development identified as playing a vital role in activating the warehouse district."

Olson said he believes it will be difficult for North Ridge to keep "rents affordable to creative industries given the purchase price of \$2.2 million. The creative and cultural sector can't pay the rent that this purchase price will command. Period."

Wallace said the two-week extension wasn't long enough for any of the developers "to suddenly change whole business plan. . . . I don't think it had any effect," he said.

Coun. Darren Hill, whose ward includes the downtown, said the evaluation the city undertook was "very extensive.

"All three proposals were very creative and every single one of them would have been a bonus and a great fit to be the impetus to redevelop the warehouse district," he said.

"It's exciting to see something starting to happen down there so (people) realize the (warehouse district) redevelopment isn't all hype, that's it's actually going to be happening."

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