

Public needs drive plans: Developers think beyond garage lot



SQUARE DEAL: The rendering above is among the proposals to replace the Winthrop Square Garage. (Rendering by The Architectural Team)

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By: Donna Goodison

Redevelopment proposals for the city-owned Winthrop Square garage feature impressive soaring skyscrapers that would reach new architectural heights in Boston's Financial District, but their mixed uses and public benefits are what's garnering kudos.

Plans include retail, restaurant, residential, hotel and innovation economy office uses to bring around-the-clock activity to the square, with other public benefits ranging from an entrepreneur innovation center to a public school.

"What impressed me about many of them were they just weren't about the building," said architect Tim Love, a Utile Inc. principal and Boston Society of Architects president. "They were thinking about Winthrop Square and that whole little neighborhood there, and they had a lot of positive things to offer."

Since the garage is cityowned, public benefits stand to carry more weight in the competitive vetting process by the Boston Redevelopment Authority.

“They certainly like public space,” said David Begelfer, CEO of NAIOP Massachusetts, a commercial real estate development trade group. “They like the idea of energizing the ground-floor space. They want to tap into the whole Downtown Crossing and build on that.”

How the buildings allow for public connections through long city blocks are among benefits the city should consider, according to Love. And hotel and residential uses — one or both of which are in all proposals — would help the Financial District become a 24-7, livework neighborhood that would draw in more businesses, he said.

But stacking residential units over offices — as Trans National Properties, Lincoln Property Co., Millennium Partners and Lend Lease Development propose — is easier said than done, said John B. Hynes III, CEO of Boston Global Investors.

“There aren’t a lot of successful examples,” Hynes said. “To stack them vertically is a challenge. We went through that very exercise at One Franklin, then Vornado (Realty Trust) got cold feet on the residential and ... pulled the plug.”

Still, he and Begelfer believe Steve Belkin’s Trans National — which has had designs on the site since 2006 — has an edge over other teams because it can tie in its adjacent 133 Federal St. property. “We looked at (the site) at length 10 years ago maybe, before it went out to bid and Belkin got it (in 2006),” Hynes said. “It was clear even back then that the best use of that parking garage was to combine it with the Belkin site.”