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# With an eye on the future, Joliet looks at U.S. Steel, old prison development

by bob okon bokon@stmedianetwork.com March 31, 2012 11:00PM

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Joliet Mayor Thomas Giarrante looks out over the former U.S. Steel plant on Collins Street Friday March 30, 2012. The city hopes to be able to get the site redeveloped. | Brett Roseman-Sun-Times Media

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JOLIET — Don't expect anything to happen fast with plans to redevelop the old Joliet prison and U.S. Steel mill sites on Collins Street.

But some things have started to happen already.

U.S. Steel has developed a cleanup plan that will be submitted to the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, Joliet Mayor Thomas Giarrante said last week.

Asked if anyone would be interested in the site if it were to be cleaned up, Giarrante said, "Absolutely. We have talked to a developer, and he is anxious. He likes the site."

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Giarrante would not name the developer but said he has experience with steel mill sites and is willing to listen to the city on ideas.

That's good, because the city is developing just that — an outline for future development at the steel mill and prison sites.

Urban Land Institute Chicago, a group of real estate professionals, gave a report on March 19 on possible future uses for the two sites. The report is going into written form in the coming weeks and was developed after months of discussions with local residents, business people and community leaders. City officials and the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning worked with the institute in developing the report.

## Good and bad

There was good news and bad news.

The bad news was for the old prison, a historical structure that is deteriorating rapidly. So rapidly, that the institute believes the prison may have as few as two or three years of decay left before it starts to become irreparable.

The institute suggested it would take about \$3.8 million just to stop the deterioration and buy time until investors could be found to put the prison into a new use.

But no one is stepping forward quickly with the city of Joliet running on a lean budget and the state of Illinois, which owns the prison, trying to plug budget shortfalls.

"The city doesn't have the money. The state doesn't have the money," Giarrante said. "Unless we get some grant, I don't see it happening."

The prison may have a lot of history. It has even attracted TV and movie crews who have filmed there for prison settings since it closed in 2002. But the idea of preserving it for posterity has yet to attract investors.

David Galowich, who headed the panel that offered a list of recommendations, said there are some reasons the U.S. Steel site would be developed before the prison. The main reason is that it is owned by a private company, U.S. Steel, which would like to do something with the property.

Still, Galowich said, the prison does have an enduring appeal while it's still standing.

"Everybody we talked to said they'd love to get in and look around," he said.

The institute proposal is to stabilize the prison building, clean it up, and start running tours to generate some income for care of the property until a developer can be found to put it into greater use.

Pointing to Alcatraz, a big tourist attraction in San Francisco, Galowich said the Joliet prison would never have that kind of appeal. But, he said, "You probably have enough demand to sustain a paying public coming in and touring the prison."

Here is a detailed look at the report and suggestions for future use of the prison and steel mill sites.

### **Prison proper**

The institute notes that there are actually two prison sites: the actual prison on 20 acres on the west side of Collins Street and a sprawling 160 acres also owned by the state on the east side of Collins.

One thing the institute concluded about the prison itself is that the idea of turning it into a unique hotel setting is more fantasy than reality.

"I'm not sure at that location you're really going to have the demand for a hotel," Galowich said.

The institute presented three possibilities for the prison proper.

Plan A is to stabilize the prison property and begin organizing tours.

Plan B was called the "sports and cultural plan." The institute suggests the prison dining hall is in good enough shape to be converted into a banquet facility that would be successful. The north side of the prison property would be demolished for athletic fields and community events. The cell blocks could be put to business use as storage facility.

"They're made of solid concrete and limestone walls," Galowich said. "You're not going to find a building more fireproof than this."

Plan C is based on the successful conversion of a military depot in Jeffersonville, Ind., into government offices and retail space. The prison walls would be partially torn down to allow cars to enter the development, and the perimeter walls would be used for stores.

### **Prison east**

The 160 acres on the east side of Collins Street is likely to see some development this year.

The city of Joliet has worked out a plan with Canadian National Railway to re-route Woodruff Road to avoid the congested rail crossing just outside the railroad's Joliet yard. The new road would wind through the prison property and by a couple of quarry lakes before connecting to Collins Street at a spot that would avoid a rail crossing.

"We hope to have the project under construction by late summer and finished by the end of the year," said James Haller, the city's director of community and economic development.

The plan also calls for the Illinois Department of Corrections to move a firing range now on the site to the Stateville Correctional Center. Relocating the firing range also would remove an obstacle to future development.

A state crime lab on the site would stay, however, Galowich said.

“In talking with the state, they said hands off,” he said. “That crime lab is not going anywhere.”

Despite the size of the property, the institute did not lay out big plans.

The panel suggests neighborhood farming and a park that would be accessible to Sator Sanchez School.

Galowich said there are bluffs on the site that would be attractive for residential development.

“It’s actually pretty gorgeous up there,” he said.

## **U.S. Steel**

The 54 acres of U.S. Steel property may be the most suitable for retail development.

“One thing that we heard continuously is that the community is underserved in retail,” Galowich said.

Don’t imagine a mall or even a big-box strip center, however. Throwing around brand names, Galowich suggested Ace Hardware rather than Home Depot. An Aldi grocery might work, he said. Walgreens or CVS also could be attracted to the site.

The market for the site is limited, he said, because of the difficulty of crossing the Des Plaines River and attracting customers from the West Side of the city.

Retail would go along Collins Street, Galowich said. The back end of the property could be used for light industry.

Most of the U.S. Steel buildings would be demolished, Galowich said. One that would stay is the historic, limestone office building along Collins Street.

“I don’t think there are any plans for that to go away,” he said.