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PARCEL REMAINS UNSOLD AT OLD CONVENTION CENTER SITE

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Though plans are well under way for most of the redevelopment at the old convention center site, there remains a 53,700-square-foot question: What will the city do with its parcel facing New York Avenue NW, the site once suggested as a future home for the city's central library?

Howard Riker, vice president of Houston-based developer Hines, said he expects his firm and co-developer Englewood, Colo.-based Archstone Smith to come to terms with the city on the bulk of the old convention center site by the end of this month.

But as the developers prepare to finalize the deal, which would bring 250,000 square feet of retail, 671 units of housing and 465,000 square feet of office space to the site, they are also hoping to develop the city-owned parcel as part of a new retail corridor along Eye Street NW, which will be opened up to two-way traffic.

The city still has no plans yet for the 53,700-square-foot portion of land in the northern section of the old convention center, according to Sean Madigan, spokesman for Deputy Mayor for Economic Development Neil Albert.

If D.C. decides against building something on the land, Hines-Archstone Smith, as part of its pending agreement with the city, would have first rights to negotiate for it, according to Riker and city officials.

So while the city mulls its options, the developers have been busy formulating plans for the site.

"It might be a good place for large-format retail," said Riker. Though the six buildings Hines already is planning will have ground-level retail and restaurants, Riker said the development team suggested to the city that retailers needing 100,000 square feet or more would be a better fit for D.C.'s portion of the land, and that national chains already had expressed interest in the location.

More retail and housing sounds good to Councilman Jack Evans, D-Ward 2, particularly in lieu of any convincing new ideas for public use of the land. Evans, chair of the council's finance committee, said a public facility on such an expensive piece of land downtown "might not be the best idea."

In the final months of his administration, former Mayor Anthony Williams proposed a relocation of the D.C. central library to that site, but the idea did not win over the city council and has since lost steam.

Attention turned to the District's portion of the site last week as Albert's office said it was putting the final touches on a land swap that will give D.C.-based developer Kingdon Gould III a 57,000-square-foot piece of the old convention center land immediately east of the District's remaining parcel.

In exchange, the city will receive land pegged for a convention center hotel on 9th Street and Massachusetts Avenue NW.

Riker, who plans to break ground on the massive mixed-use development in January 2009, said his team is negotiating its purchase of about 60,000 square feet at the corner of H and 9th streets NW, where 217 condominiums and retail will go, and the leasing of more than double that on which to build 455 apartments, offices and more retail.

Riker said specialty retailers and grocery stores, as well as office tenants, had expressed interest in the project, which is scheduled to be complete by January 2012.