

Site near downtown to be redone

Senior property near CBD to be redone

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Five proposals have been unveiled by those putting together a master redevelopment plan for the Rebekah Baines Johnson Center near I-35 on the north shore of Lady Bird Lake. Retail and more housing may appear.

Prime property near downtown could be redeveloped in the future for restaurants, businesses and residents of all ages, or it may remain mostly as a haven for senior citizens.

Those are some of the options being presented as the first steps toward a redevelopment master plan for the site of the Rebekah Baines Johnson Center tower on Lady Bird Lake just east of I-35.

Last year, the nonprofit that runs the RBJ Center, Austin Geriatric Center Inc., hired HS&A Project Management of Austin to create a master plan for its 22-acre site dedicated to housing and health care for low-income seniors.

HS&A has delivered five redevelopment plans, which differ greatly in size and scope, to Austin Geriatric Center's board. One option — the simplest of the five concepts — proposes a total of 493,000 square feet of senior housing. Another on the other end of the spectrum totals 1.3 million square feet and offers senior housing, parking garages, commercial space, apartments and restaurants. Two of the five

scenarios bring in city-owned land with its existing five-story building that houses some city health services.

The nonprofit's board — led by chairman [Clarke Heidrick](#), a partner at law firm Graves Dougherty Hearon & Moody PC — will narrow the options during its Nov. 8 meeting. Each of the five plans complies with current zoning and the city's East Cesar Chavez Neighborhood Plan and the Waterfront Overlay Plan.

After that discussion, the board could make a decision on which option to follow as early as December, said [Paul Saldana](#), vice chair of the board and co-founder of Brisa Communications.

HS&A is recommending Option C, which includes 500 residential units for seniors, 292 multifamily units at market rate and parking garages.

The economics of each option will weigh heavily into the nonprofit's decision, Saldana said.

"Even though we are a nonprofit, we are fortunate to own almost 18 acres, and that provides us with the leverage for a very solid redevelopment plan," he said.

The nonprofit is open to selling parcels or partnering with developers, Saldana said.

If the board selects an option that includes apartments or condos, the nonprofit would like such a project to include affordable housing for a mix of incomes.

Financing to build affordable housing could come from the Austin Housing Finance Corp. or through a potential city general obligation bond election, which could have dollars earmarked for affordable housing.

Whichever plan is selected, the board has held fast to its commitment to provide housing and services to low-income seniors, said [Helen Varty](#), executive director of Austin Geriatric Center.

The average age of residents is about 70, and the median annual income is \$12,500. These residents pay an average of \$338 per month.

Each of the five plans would double the housing units for seniors to 500 units and retain the original 16-story tower — which is structurally sound — and renovate it.

"The board is sticking to its original mission, and certainly the largest priority is the residents and renovating this building," Varty said.

If the board chooses a concept with city-owned land, it would have to bring the City Council into the selection process, Saldana said. The next step would be to send out request for proposals to architects and construction companies.

Saldana would like to see the board make a plan by the end of the year.

Courtesy of JB Goodwin