

Blaisdell Site Ripe for Reinvention, Experts Say



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An iconic new building. Better pedestrian access. A private or nonprofit operator.

Those were among many ideas that a panel of experts shared Friday about how city officials can "re-imagine" 22 acres occupied by the aging Neal S. Blaisdell Center as the nucleus of a culture and arts district for Honolulu.

The ideas were presented by fellows of the Rose Center for Public Leadership, an affiliate of the Washington, D.C.-based Urban Land Institute, which agreed to brainstorm on the city initiative to redevelop or improve its 50-year-old arena, concert building and exhibition hall suffering from deferred maintenance.

"This is not a plan," said Andre Brumfield, panel co-chairman and president of a Chicago design and planning firm. "It is really to encourage thoughts."

Panelists spent four days in Honolulu talking with local government officials and other stakeholders while getting to know the city and the Blaisdell property. They gave a frank and free assessment of opportunities and challenges facing the city and its goal for the Blaisdell site.

Ginger White-Brunetti, deputy director of Denver's Department of Arts and Venues, said a city sometimes isn't the best operator of arts venues such as the Blaisdell.

White-Brunetti noted that nonprofit organizations, for-profit companies or a mix of private and public entities are alternatives that have worked in other cities.

Specific areas where the city could generate revenue that would help pay for redeveloping or improving the Blaisdell include selling naming rights to buildings, sign advertising, diversifying food and beverage concessions, and charging more for parking, White-Brunetti said.

In Denver the city adds a fee called a seat tax to event tickets that helps pay off bond financing for arts venues and generates \$3 million a year for facility upkeep.

In Portland, Ore., each household is charged an annual \$35 arts fee that helps support art facilities.

Adding retail to the property would be another way to generate revenue supporting renewed Blaisdell facilities, panelists said.

The financing ideas suggested that the city doesn't necessarily have to sell some of the valuable Blaisdell site to a private developer for high-rise condominium construction to help pay for Blaisdell renewal work.

Panel co-chairman Christopher Kurz, president and CEO of a Baltimore-based real estate and mortgage banking firm, said philanthropic investors finance big public works projects, noting as an example the 24-acre Millennium Park in Chicago where private donors paid for almost half the \$475 million project.

Panelist Roger Williams, a Maryland lawyer who has been involved with many cultural institutions, encouraged Honolulu officials to build an iconic structure that will be sought out by visitors.

"Create something people want to come see," he said. "Don't be daunted by the expense."

Williams said tourists will often visit museums and sports arenas for their

architecture and not for what's being shown inside. He added that including retail and other operations that are open to the public even when big events aren't being held can improve the finances and activity of such facilities.

Brumfield, the panel co-chairman, suggested that one way to phase redevelopment is demolishing the exhibition hall in the middle of the property and building a new combined arena and concert hall. That way, the existing arena and concert hall can keep operating while they are replaced.

One big opportunity several Rose Center fellows commented on was creating better links between the Blaisdell and adjacent sites Thomas Square, the Honolulu Museum of Art, the museum's art school and McKinley High School to form a culture and arts district.

"Having it all together is unique," said panelist Maura Sullivan, deputy chief administrative officer for the city of Memphis, Tenn. "You have this place this gem."

Panelist Jennifer Toole, president of a transportation planning and engineering firm in Washington, D.C., suggested that creating pedestrian crossings between blocks such as between the museum entrance and the middle of Thomas Square would help connect blocks and enhance public use.

Reducing or breaking up the number of traffic lanes people need to cross on King and Beretania also would enhance connectivity of the blocks.

"That really is a considerable barrier," she said, noting that there are 11 traffic lanes between the museum and the Blaisdell site.

Making Thomas Square more inviting by modifying the barrierlike planter boxes and hedges was another idea discussed. Adding more seating and elements that better "activate" the park, such as water features kids can play in, would help.

George Atta, director of Honolulu's Department of Planning and Permitting, said

making the park more inviting is something the city is pursuing after discouraging Occupy Honolulu protesters and homeless from camping on the sidewalks around the park.

Atta also said plans are in the works to extend the pedestrian mall running from Hotel Street downtown past the state Capitol, Honolulu Hale and the Frank F. Fasi Municipal Building to Thomas Square by adding a new section beyond Alapai Street.

Another pedestrian improvement floated by the panel was to create a lane between McKinley High School and the Blaisdell presently walled off by the Blaisdell's parking structure.

Mayor Kirk Caldwell, who sought the Rose Center's help, said he heard a lot of great ideas and considers them a starting point.

"I look at this as the beginning of a journey," he said. "If we do this right, we thrive as a people."

Caldwell estimated that coming up with and acting on a redevelopment plan could take three to six years.

The Rose Center fellows will continue to study the issue and make recommendations in a final report by the end of the year. After that the city intends to solicit community input to help shape a vision for moving forward and carrying out a plan.

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