



October 8, 2008

City Commission OKs land deal for arts project

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The Tallahassee City Commission on Tuesday approved an agreement that essentially would donate city land for a project called the "Arts Exchange."

But commissioners made it clear that other than providing four acres of city land off Railroad Avenue, they weren't writing a blank check for the project.

The agreement requires Artspace Inc. of Minneapolis and the Council on Culture & Arts to provide plans for financing construction and operations and a timetable for development. Those plans will show how much the city could be asked to pay for supporting the project.

"Everyone recognizes this will be back," City Commissioner Allan Katz said. "This gift is predicated on certain benchmarks being met."

The Arts Exchange will create a center where artists live and work with a theater, shops and a coffeehouse that would attract tourists, supporters say. Plans call for 50 residential units and 75,000 square feet, including office space for nonprofit groups.

The estimated project cost is \$33.1 million, which doesn't include the \$1.7 million value of the city's four acres.

The agreement, approved by a 4-0 vote, calls for selling the property for \$10 or leasing it for \$10 a year. City Commissioner Debbie Lightsey was absent.

The two-year purchase option requires Artspace, a nonprofit arts developer, and the council to provide plans within six months that would show how much the city could be asked to spend, said Michael Parker, the city's assistant director for economic and community development.

Peggy Brady, executive director of the Council on Culture & Arts, said project supporters hope to pay for construction with donations from the private sector.

Brady acknowledged commissioners' concerns that financing could be difficult in the new economic climate.

"We know the challenges we face," she said. "We do not think they are obstacles. We think they are challenges."
