



April 10, 2008

City leaders offer Arts on Gaines project a home

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A proposed mix of artists' lofts and work studios featuring an arts incubator has found a home, close by its initial preferred location on Gaines Street.

Tallahassee city commissioners on Wednesday approved setting aside a 3.83-acre, triangle-shaped parcel fronting Railroad Avenue just north of the Amtrak station for the Arts on Gaines project. They also approved up to \$875,000 to build a 10,000-square-foot bioscience incubator facility at Innovation Park, to possibly house Cypress Systems, a biotechnology firm.

Tallahassee is one of several communities the California-based company is considering for relocation. Michael Parker, the city's economic development director, said the facility might be built even if Cypress doesn't relocate here.

The new location for the Arts on Gaines project leaves available a 4.3 acre site at Gaines and Gay streets, which its developers initially wanted for a proposed mixed-use residential development featuring 282 residential units and 22,500 square feet of retail space.

Commissioners touted the Arts on Gaines project as a catalyst for the redevelopment of the Gaines Street corridor, which the city wants to transform into a walkable gateway to a future "18-hour downtown" of shops and entertainment venues.

"I think that this ... project has enormous potential for the city," Commissioner Allan Katz said. "I want to do what we need to do to get this going."

But commissioners worried about the price tag. The project — 50 units of affordable live/work housing units and a 75,000-square-foot rehearsal and commercial space for artists — is seeking about \$5 million from local sources.

"We'd all like to see it, but it has to be less of a government hit," Commissioner Mark Mustian said. "We'd be stretching to do half that."

Greg Handberg, the vice president for properties with the project's nonprofit developer, Artspace, said the \$5 million didn't have to come from the city but could be an array of city, county and state housing programs and arts grants, plus local philanthropists.

With a site now in hand, the project's proponents said, financial questions shouldn't derail the project.

"We now have an opportunity to move forward," said Peggy Brady, the executive director of the Council on Culture and Arts, who has been spearheading the project. "We're not delaying any longer."