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Crossroad on Gaines: It's time for city to be bold

When Tallahassee commissioners Wednesday weigh the pros and cons of a Gaines Street arts-and-entertainment redevelopment plan, the questions they must ask will be similar to ones that every investor poses.

What return do we expect, and how much risk can we reasonably afford?

Commissioners will have to decide whether a long-held vision to turn Gaines Street into something spectacular can be transformed into reality, or if Tallahassee must settle for an alternative.

Given that it involves a significant public investment — at least \$2.9 million for a largely private \$33 million project — the choice is neither obvious nor easy. That's why it's important for the city's elected leaders to strike the right balance between being bold community builders and protectors of the public purse.

The Council on Culture & Arts (COCA) and Artspace Inc., a Minneapolis-based nonprofit real-estate developer, have shaped an ambitious and exciting plan that would be a huge cultural and economic boon to the capital city.

Arts on Gaines would be a combination affordable housing/arts incubator project, and would go a long way toward making that corridor a popular destination instead of the unattractive thoroughfare it is today.

Proponents eye as their No. 1 location half of a 4.3-acre city-owned site at Gaines and Gay streets, conveniently located near the eclectic arts district, Railroad Square.

However, an Atlanta developer is interested in buying the same property for \$4.1 million for a mixed-use residential development, and is seeking no financial help from taxpayers.

The Arts on Gaines plan calls for 50-unit live/work residential complex for artists — but not just the kind who paint on canvas or perform in front of audiences. "When we say artists," COCA executive director Peggy Brady told Democrat columnist Gerald Ensley last month, "we're talking about people who work with their brains and with their expressions. The character of this community is its creative class."

Arts on Gaines also would include 75,000-square-foot arts incubator that breeds arts-related commerce and creativity.

Those are tangible details. But the vision promises results that can't be so readily measured but are part of the dream for turning Tallahassee into a mid-sized city that's second to none: building an effective bridge between Florida A&M and Florida State universities, and creating an attractive gateway from the airport.

There's no disputing that the COCA/Artspace proposal is splendid. In the face of a steep economic downturn and financial uncertainties for local government, however, commissioners must determine whether it's too rich for Tallahassee's blood or just the jump-start we need.

The good news is that city commissioners are not pushovers. They will ask tough questions of COCA and Artspace. In addition, an Artspace representative said in January that the preferred location is not the only potential site for the project — suggesting that if the Gaines-Gay site doesn't bear fruit, other options will be pursued.

The safest strategy — taking the \$4.1 million from a direct sale of the land to a private developer and looking for an alternate Artspace site — may not be the best for remaking Gaines to best serve the economic and cultural interests of the community. On Wednesday, city commissioners should be daring, not desperate, and show that political leaders can also be part of the creative class.
