

Joliet explores mall road funding

PROPOSED BRIDGE STREET TOWN CENTRE

November 22, 2007

By **BOB OKON** Staff writer

JOLIET -- Sales tax from the future Bridge Street Town Centre would pay for \$90 million in road and interchange work accompanying the shopping mall, according to a development plan still in the works.

A couple of city council members are urging staff to examine other funding sources for the biggest commercial project in the city, rather than depend on retail sales off of the mall.

They suggested at a city council finance committee meeting the possibility of a tax increment financing district, which would use real estate taxes off of the property to pay for public improvements.

TIF districts, however, are designed for hard-to-develop, or "blighted," properties, and that does raise a problem for the 325-acre Bridge Street site near the crossing of Interstates 55 and 80.

"It's probably the best piece of property in the nation," said City Manager John Mezera. "It's hard to say that it's blighted."

Finance committee Chairman Anthony Uremovic suggested the city give it a try.

"It can qualify if we sell it the right way," Uremovic said.

Uremovic and Councilman Timothy Brophy noted that Grundy County officials are contemplating a TIF district to pay the local share of an interchange at I-80 and Brisbin Road.

So far, Joliet has planned to use 50 percent of sales taxes generated by the Bridge Street Town Centre to pay for an expanded interchange at Interstate 55 and Illinois 59. The funds would also pay for a connector route leading to Houbolt Road.

Mezera agreed to look into TIF district possibilities for the project, which is to include 1.5 million square feet of retail and restaurant space.

Mezera told the Finance Committee that engineering studies on the project will have advanced enough by January that he can go back to Joliet Junior College and discuss land acquisition for a road that would run from the mall to Houbolt Road.

O&S Holdings in Santa Monica, Calif., is developing the project. Construction could start in late 2008 with plans to open stores by late 2010.

Bob Okon can be reached at (815) 729-6046 or BOKON@SCN1.COM