

## EDITORIALS

## Laying the groundwork

### *Columbus Commons plan prepares City Center site for a better future*

Columbus City Center looms as a 9-acre vacuum at the core of Downtown, sucking economic vitality out of surrounding blocks. The plan unveiled yesterday to raze it and turn it into a park, while development opportunities are pursued, makes the most of an unfortunate situation.

If development pans out over the next five to 10 years for the proposed Columbus Commons, the site will become a jewel, with shops, apartments, entertainment and offices surrounding the core of the remaining parkland.

At minimum, if the Capital South Urban Redevelopment Corp. can secure the \$20 million it needs to demolish the mall, Columbus will have an expansive new green space at its center, something the city has lacked.

The life span of City Center was shorter than anyone expected. Tearing down a structurally sound building that cost \$116 million and is only 20 years old is not a course to be embarked upon lightly.

But Capitol South, the nonprofit owners of City Center, looked long and hard for other options for the building before giving up.

Retailers are not interested in the mall's space with no street frontage. Competition from like malls in the suburbs, which contributed much to City Center's demise, remains too strong.

Reconfiguring the building for use as offices or anything other than mall stores would be prohibitively expensive because the mall is structurally unsuitable, from its windowless exterior to heating, ventilation and airconditioning systems that would have to be redesigned.

Would-be developers came to Capitol South with ideas, but none appeared realistic.

Now, with hundreds of billions of dollars in federal stimulus money on the table, Capitol South officials see a chance to give change a head start by taking the troublesome structure out of the picture.

They're asking for \$15 million in stimulus funds, and Capitol South plans to contribute \$5 million. It plans to begin interior demolition in May and start taking down the structure in June or July. Wisely, plans call for preserving the hundreds of underground parking spaces at the site. By fall 2010, Columbus Commons could be open for tree-lined strolls, lunchtime picnics and weekend gatherings.

The first step toward transforming much of that grassy space into a lively neighborhood is supposed to come in the form of moderate-priced apartments along S. High Street and at the corner of High and Rich streets. Planners will invite proposals from developers shortly.

Later phases call for office and retail buildings on the eastern edge of the site, part of which fronts on S. 3<sup>rd</sup> Street and some of which is behind the Hyatt on Capitol Square.

The pace of economic recovery will do a lot to determine whether and how soon the whole plan, at an estimated price tag of \$165 million, will be accomplished.

But whatever the next decade brings, prospects for Downtown development will be better with a green, grassy oasis at the core than with an empty hulk that no one wants.