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Real Estate

A wealth of possibilities for Bayside

Expo hall's future in doubt if shows go to convention center

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DORCHESTER — High rise condominiums overlooking Boston Harbor. Boston office space without the downtown rents or arduous commute. A suburban-style shopping center in the city.

The possible reuses for the Bayside Expo Center in Dorchester are many and varied, according to Boston area real estate professionals.

"It's an exceptional site," said William "Buzz" Constable, principal of A.W. Perry, a Boston and South Shore development firm. "It has spectacular access from the highway and from transit. It's close enough to be associated with the South Boston neighborhood. And obviously, it has the waterfront."

Bayside's future as host for trade shows and conventions is up in the air following Governor Mitt Romney's signing of legislation that allows the rival Boston Convention & Exhibition Center to hold the kind of "gate show" gatherings that are the Bayside's bread and butter, such as car and boat shows.

The privately owned Expo Center is reassessing its future now that it must compete with the heavily subsidized and state-owned convention center.

Spokeswoman Catherine O'Neill said, "The change in the law will certainly change the gate show market in our area over the next several years, and since that is something we simply can't control, it may make sense to begin looking in new



MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

The Bayside Expo Center, sitting on prime waterfront land in Dorchester, has seen such varied sights as Halloween ghouls, custom cars, college graduates, show dogs, spring flowers, and baby races.

directions for the future use of this facility."

The Expo Center is on Dorchester's Columbia Point, just off Morrissey Boulevard and the Southeast Expressway. It is a short walk from the JFK/UMass Red Line rapid transit station. Not far away is the University of Massachusetts-Boston campus, Boston College High School, John F. Kennedy Library, South Bay shopping center, and South Boston's Carson Beach.

The Bayside Expo Center was built in

the early 1980s on the site of an abandoned shopping center, near the Columbia Point public housing project.

While Bayside's owners are not talking about what they would do with the property, others in the real estate community said a variety of uses can succeed there.

Developer Peter F. O'Connell, who built and now manages most of the Marina Bay waterfront complex in neighboring Quincy and was codeveloper of the Bayside Expo Center, said he believes

housing would be the most successful use.

"It's so close to Boston, it is a great spot for residential development," he said. O'Connell estimated the site could accommodate 1,500 housing units.

Although Bayside Expo appears to sit on the harbor at the end of Carson Beach, the site is not technically waterfront property, as there is a landscaped section of the Harborwalk between it and the bay.

Constable said the property would be

ideal for a mixed-use development oriented to the nearby transit station. He envisioned a blend of housing, offices, retail, and possibly a hotel.

"I can't imagine a better ground-up site in Boston," Constable said.

Jason S. Weissman, founder and principal of Boston Realty Advisors, said a "lifestyle center" shopping plaza would be appropriate for the site. The upscale development would have restaurants, a movie theater, a natural foods grocery, and other high-end stores, according to Weissman, whose firm is a large real estate brokerage.

"The inner urban Boston core is under-retailed now," said Weissman. "This is an up-and-coming area. It would draw people from Quincy, South Boston, Braintree, Dorchester, and Roxbury."

Weissman said there also could be apartments above the stores — a feature of some newer lifestyle centers, which attempt to mimic the design of traditional downtowns.

Cathy Thompson, principal and founder of the Boston commercial real estate brokerage GVA Thompson Doyle Hennessy & Stevens, thinks the site is best suited for offices.

"A large user of office space would be very interested in that site," said Thompson. "It could be a good, affordable option to the financial district. It's a large enough site that you could offer parking and other amenities."

Thompson said it could be a good location for a back office financial operation. "It might be more for users who are South Shore oriented," she said.

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