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## It could be a Grand Junction after all

By MIKE WIGGINS The Daily Sentinel

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Radioactive mill tailings, hundreds of junked cars that leaked toxic materials into the soil and water and medical waste piled up on the property north of the Colorado River and west of Fifth Street at various points in the last half-century. When government agencies and nonprofit foundations finally cleaned it up in the 1990s, it took seven years and \$5 million to do the work.

Now that the chokehold has been lifted, Grand Junction city officials are breathing life into land once used by Ute tribes as a path between the Uncompahgre Plateau and the Bookcliffs, giving it a new voice for future generations.

The city is teaming up with a group of consultants in an ambitious redevelopment of the 65-acre property, rolling out plans to build an assortment of homes, retail and office space, public facilities and riverside trails. Stakeholders say it will be a long, drawn-out effort to reconnect the community with its namesake – the junction of the rivers – and spark the revitalization of other areas around downtown.

“Just as downtown that is important to the community, I think there’s no more important area than the confluence of the rivers. That’s the namesake”, said Grand Junction City Councilman Jim Spehar. “This particular piece of property deserves the kind of work that’s being put into it. It deserves to become a focal point for Grand Junction.”

Some believe the Jarvis property could take on as much importance and have as much impact on Grand Junction as Operation Foresight, the 1960s initiative that transformed Main Street into a shopping and dining mecca for locals and tourists alike and garnered the city national recognition.

In Jarvis, the city sees a chance to capitalize on views of Colorado National Monument and the Colorado River and the proximity of Riverside Parkway, which will cut through the property as it carries traffic between Mesa Mall and Pear Park. Officials say it’s one of the few areas in the region where development can occur at the edge of the Colorado River.

“This is one of the most unique sites in the state, in the West,” said Nore Winter, owner of Winter & Co., the Boulder-based consultant the city has hired to help craft development plans.

Few would have thought that until recently.

Except for a period in the 1940s, when it was farm land, the Jarvis property has a storied history of degradation. A north-side channel of the river was diked and mined for gravel in the 1950s. The resulting hole served as a municipal

landfill and dump site for uranium tailings. The family for which the land is named turned it into an auto salvage yard, giving residents and visitors an unsightly view when they entered downtown from the south.

The city bought the property from the Jarvises in 1990, then got bogged down in a years-long battle with the federal government over who should clean up. The job was finally finished in 1997.

City officials cleared the property completely this fall when they tore down the Williams House, a century-old structure that had been in disrepair for years. The land is now dotted with large patches of barren ground, groves of tamarisk, short brush, pools of standing water and a backwater pond for endangered fish that was put in after the property was cleaned up. The Colorado Riverfront Trail cuts through the heart of the property but affords few views of the river. There is no direct access to the water.

The next stage of redevelopment began a year and a half ago, when the city hosted an open house to identify issues and opportunities with the property. City planners put together a development strategy and convened two panels of real estate agents, builders and redevelopment experts to review the plans and offer input.

There is no timetable for building on the property. The city and any developer or group of developers it partners with won't be able to do much work on the site until the parkway is completed in 2008. But that hasn't discouraged the city from devising some rough sketches to show what the property could look like years down the road.

The concepts are preliminary, but the city and its consultants are proposing a mixed-use development on roughly 40 acres that abuts on the Riverside neighborhood to the northwest. The project could include 350 homes, with a mixture of patio homes, condominiums and townhomes. Ten percent of the units would be affordable housing. Initial plans also call for retail, office, industrial, light manufacturing, park and community space. City planners hope to settle on a final conceptual plan by the end of the year.

City officials have made it clear they don't want Jarvis to compete with downtown merchants, and that's why they intend to limit retail development. Some envision a coffee shop or restaurant. Others see a business that rents roller blades and bicycles for people to recreate along the river.

Mixed-use development remains a novel concept, however, and hasn't worked in other areas of Grand Junction. In 2000, the city applied a mixed-use zoning to more than 400 acres of private land along 24 Road north Mesa Mall. Earlier this year, several of those property owners asked the city to relax stringent development standards that have prevented their land from selling or developing. A citizens' committee is reviewing their request.

The difference with the Jarvis property is that the city owns it and can afford to be patient with it. City leaders are also keeping development plans broad and flexible enough to allow the details to be market-driven to some degree once the land is ready to be developed.

Consultants have encouraged the city to remain true to its vision of a variety of land uses. They know it would be easy and profitable to sell Jarvis to a developer who could turn it into rows of housing or warehouses. But the consensus among those involved in the Jarvis redevelopment is that would spoil an area spoiled for far too long.

"You have the opportunity to turn this into a beacon for Grand Junction. This is your stamp on the city," Dale Beede, a commercial real estate broker who sits on the panel currently reviewing development plans, told City Council members earlier this month.

Some believe redeveloping Jarvis could have a domino effect on surrounding neighborhoods, encouraging land owners in Riverside and lower downtown to reinvent their properties.

“I think this has the potential to demonstrate to everyone in the community...what that whole area could become over a long period of time,” Spehar said. “If this project gets going, and once it’s under way, it’s going to demonstrate to a lot of property owners a higher and better use for their properties.”

Consultants’ latest projections show the city could make a profit on developing Jarvis. If that happens, Spehar said he would like to see council members take that money and invest it in other redevelopment projects.

For the plethora of opportunities with Jarvis, there are just as many challenges.

The first and largest is money – and the fact that the city currently has none budgeted for the property.

The project has an estimated \$70 million price tag. The city will share that burden with a group of developers but will pick up a big chunk of the up-front costs, such as providing infrastructure to the property. City officials haven’t yet discussed how they will generate the funding.

Spehar said he would like to see the council set aside some money in its 2006 budget for Jarvis, if it for no other reason than to show the community it’s serious about making the project reality.

“Obviously, it’s going to take a significant investment to make that project viable,” he said.

It won’t be viable unless the city gets the property out of the way of potential floodwaters. The land is in the city’s 100-year flood plain, and officials will likely have to increase the elevation of the property to move it out of the flood plain to clear the way for development.

“As a private developer, I wouldn’t touch a piece of property in the flood plain,” said Bruce Milyard, who sits on the review panel with his wife, Toni, a residential real-estate agent, and Beede.

The city is also confronted with facilities near the Jarvis property that some worry could detract from the value of the land.

One is a series of towering power poles that line the west end of the property. Ideally, the lines would disappear from sight by being placed underground, but Xcel Energy has told city officials such a job would be difficult and expensive.

The city must also figure out how – or if they need – to handle potential issues with the asphalt plant that sits just northeast of the Jarvis property.

Some council members say they have trouble envisioning homes and commercial property in an area long-dominated by industrial uses.

“It’s not so much a matter of right and wrong as it’s a matter of compatibility,” said Councilwoman Teresa Coons. “I’m not advocating tearing it down, but it makes it difficult to think about the kind of vision we’ve been presented with the asphalt plant in the middle of it.”

People commuting through the area sometimes complain about the odor from the plant, and some wonder whether that will scare off potential investors.

Asked to comment on those concerns, Tracy Bryan, the plant manager for SemMaterials, which brought the plant from Koch Industries earlier this year, referred questions to public relations staff at the company's headquarters in Tulsa, Okla.

Susan Dornblaser, spokeswoman for SemGroup, the parent company of SemMaterials, said last week no one from the City Council has contacted representatives at the plant with concerns. She said the plant has never had any violations of federal emission standards and suggested worries about odor are unfounded.

"It's just not an issue. It hasn't been in any of the other locations," Dornblaser said. "The company is extremely environmentally concerned and very interested in environmental health and safety issues."

Jarvis property stakeholders are aware of the obstacles. The community leaders who spearheaded Operation Foresight grappled with their fair share more than 40 years ago, including the then-foreign concepts of high street curbs and angled parking, according to Spehar.

The Grand Junction native was graduating from high school when Main Street was torn up for the redesign. He remembers what that did for the city at the time.

"This would be magic," Spehar said of Jarvis, "in the same way that was magic back then."

*Mike Wiggins can be reached via e-mail at [mwiggins@gjds.com](mailto:mwiggins@gjds.com)*

If the swath of land near the confluence of the Colorado and Gunnison rivers could talk, it might be inaudible, muffled by the abuse heaped upon it for decades.