

EDITORIAL: Restore Winona to city tax rolls

Private use is best for old hospital

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IBJ Staff

The Children's Museum of Indianapolis has a vision for what could become of the old Winona Memorial Hospital property at 3232 N. Meridian St. And because the museum is one of the city's shining stars, city officials have an obligation to seriously consider whatever proposal the museum might bring to the table.

It's hard to imagine the museum's vision for the property prevailing, however, if there's another option that would add the hospital grounds back to the city's property tax rolls.

Winona and its surrounding parking lots have been vacant since the hospital's former owner declared bankruptcy in 2004. The unpaid property taxes on the property total \$2 million, and with the city poised to take control of the site, there's little hope it will produce income for the city anytime soon.

The Children's Museum has an appealing idea for reusing the property, but it wouldn't add to the tax base.

The Children's Museum, which is just a block south of the hospital grounds, is as eager as other neighbors to see the old Winona once again contribute to the vibrancy of the North Meridian corridor. Museum officials have in mind using federal grants to clear the site and turn it into a park and outdoor learning center. We agree it would be a great use for the property.

But another potential user, Denver-based Ecolonomic Realty Group, is studying gutting the hospital building and recasting it as senior apartments. That use doesn't sound as appealing as what the Children's Museum proposes—until you consider it would be a for-profit, property-tax-paying operation.

If the Denver firm decides it wants to pursue what is likely to be a \$25 million project and presents a solid proposal, the city is in no position to turn down the tax revenue it would generate. Center Township, where the property sits, already is overrun with huge government buildings, not-for-profit hospitals and other public institutions that don't pay property taxes.

That drives up taxes for other Center Township property owners who have to shoulder more of the burden of funding city government. That disparity drives people out of the township and, worse, sometimes out of the county into neighboring counties that have fewer needs and a greater percentage of privately owned land to fill their coffers.

The state-imposed property tax caps that are about to go into effect will further challenge Indianapolis to raise the money needed to fund city government.

As much as we applaud the Children's Museum for its wonderful facilities and the great reputation it enjoys around the world, it would be hard to accept yet another piece of property in Center Township falling off the tax rolls. •

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