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Full speed ahead on Sabres' Webster Block plan

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Faced with two impressive development proposals for the downtown Webster Block, Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown said he faced a difficult decision.

Developer Carl Paladino was offering a \$64 million project anchored by a brand-name hotel, nearly 100,000 square feet of Class A office space and 42 upscale apartments with underground parking and street-level retail and

restaurant space.

Then there was a proposal from Buffalo Sabres owner Terry Pegula, who pledged a \$123 million, mixed-use project anchored by a pair of hockey rinks, a 200-room hotel, underground parking and

some street-level retail and restaurant space. The complex would be connected to First Niagara Center, which is located across One Seymour H. Knox III Plaza from the Webster Block.

Brown and his development

team ultimately selected the Sabres' proposal. They were drawn in by several factors, including the long-term impact on downtown, the Canalside District and the

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Gates development project found favor with Kaleida



WEBSTER BLOCK: Sabres' proposal had more of the impact elements that city developers were seeking

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region as a whole.

"It is an excellent, transformational proposal for downtown Buffalo," Brown said.

The decision, announced Aug. 29, answered a key development issue facing the Brown administration. With the Webster Block's Canalside neighbor taking hold, leaders were pressing for a project that would complement it, not compete.

"It completes the east side of Main Street for us," said Tom Dee, Erie Canal Harbor Development Corp. president. "That level of private-sector investment by the Sabres really gives us further validation that Canalside is going down the right road."

Brown said his decision was not an easy process. Bids were submitted June 15 and the mayor and his staff immediately started a complex vetting process that included internal reviews and input from a nine-member committee of community leaders. Meetings were held this summer with the respective development teams, allowing each to fine-tune their proposals.

"Questions were answered," he said.

It wasn't until he and the committee met Aug. 20 that it became clear the Sabres' bid had emerged as the favorite. According to Brown, it wasn't any one factor but a series of things that tipped the decision.

"The Sabres' proposal, in its totality, had more of the elements we were looking for," Brown said.

Chief among them was how the complex – dubbed HARBORCenter – would annually attract an estimated 500,000 people, mostly because of two rinks that would serve as a hub for youth, amateur, adult and

recreational hockey leagues and tournaments.

Having the Sabres brand name attached to the project was also a plus, he said.

"Yes, there was a 'wow' factor, no question about that. But it was just one of many factors," he said.

HARBORCenter is designed to be a magnet for the still-emerging Canalside District along Main Street. The venue is expected to open by September 2014, with construction starting next year. The rinks, including one that seats 1,800, will open first. The hotel and other amenities will follow, with the complex fully developed by May 2015.

"In the context of Canalside, this makes more sense," said Andrew Rudnick, Buffalo Niagara Partnership president and CEO.

In the ranks of the ad hoc community committee, a key issue was the impact of the selected development on downtown. Privately, some committee members felt that Class A office space – a prime feature to Paladino's offer – was an issue, especially



The Buffalo Sabres were awarded development rights for Buffalo's Webster Block. Ted Black, left, Sabres president; Cliff Benson, Sabres chief development officer; and Mayor Byron Brown were at the Aug. 29 announcement.

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against the backdrop of the nearby One HSBC Center, which is about to lose three major tenants.

"Spec (office space) was an issue," Rudnick said.

The Rev. Darius Pridgen, True Bethel Church pastor and Ellicott District councilman, said he is glad the Sabres are privately funding the project. That was key to his support for HARBORCenter, he said. Pridgen

was a member of the ad hoc committee.

"I think it is going to put Buffalo on the map for a number of different reasons," he said. "We're talking about a downtown destination spot that is being developed but not on the back of the city residents. This wasn't an easy decision, but in my mind, keeping the end game of developing something special for Buffalo, the Sabres' proposal best met that vision."



COLLEGE COSTS: Shifting burden to students

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It's a nearly universal issue among students there, although some understand it