

# County, city discuss future of 'old' highway shop site

By Amy Smith, Union staff writer | Posted: Thursday, December 4, 2014 8:41 am

JEFFERSON — The Jefferson County Infrastructure Committee met with officials from the City of Jefferson Wednesday to discuss possible options when the Highway Department moves its shop to its new site.

Construction is well under way on the \$15.37 million facility, for which a ground-breaking ceremony was held Aug. 11. Located at 1425 Wisconsin Drive (County Highway W) on the west side of Jefferson, the site of the former Countryside Home, the highway shop will be home to the Highway Department's entire fleet of 60-plus vehicles.

In the wake of the upcoming move to the new facility, the city has expressed interest in the current 25-acre site located on the Rock River, which could revitalize a downtown and riverfront redevelopment plan that the city had originally implemented in 2006.

"The city looks at that site as a pretty wonderful opportunity," City Administrator Timothy Freitag said. "A complicated and challenging one, but not many communities have 25 acres of redevelopment space."

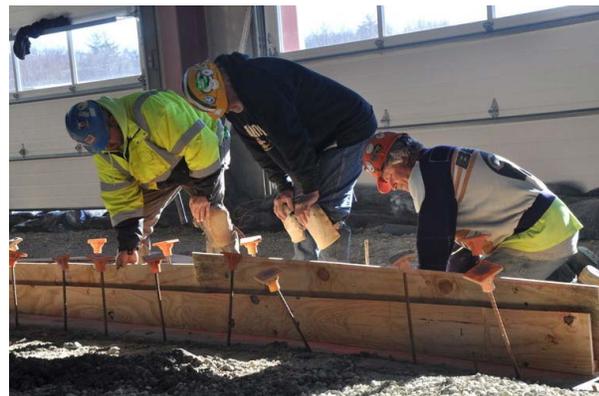
Located on Jefferson's north side, the current highway shop site falls within one of the city's tax incremental financing districts.

Funds from TID No. 5 could be utilized to redevelop the land to fit the vision of the city, which includes a mixture of uses such as residential and retail areas.

A downtown and riverfront redevelopment plan once proposed adding a two-story riverfront townhouse, single-family or duplex lots, a riverwalk and a public green space with access to the Rock River that would utilize the areas on the site that are affected by the floodplain.

One significant challenge the site presents is the potential for environmental risks due to the storage of fuel tanks on the site for several decades. Standards in earlier operation in how oil products were dealt with greatly differs from today's practices, which leaves the quality of the land at the site unknown.

"We don't know, over the course of the last 75 years, what could have taken place," Jefferson County Administrator Ben Wehmeier told meeting attendees. "We need to find out what is underneath those buildings. It doesn't necessarily mean we are going to find anything, but it is part of our due diligence."



## HIGHWAY UPDATE

HIGHWAY UPDATE — Work on the new Jefferson County Highway Department facility continues to move forward as a group of Jefferson County supervisors toured the site Wednesday. During the visit that followed the Infrastructure Committee meeting, the group witnessed the significant progress on the building by Maas Brothers Construction Co. The \$15.37 million facility is set for completion by March 2015. For more photos click [here](#).

About three years ago, Jefferson County underwent a phase-one brownfield study on the property that looked at areas the county believed might be affected.

However, before the city could consider the site seriously, Freitag said, the county would need to further investigate the potential environmental issues at the property with a phase-two brownfield study.

“The uncertainty of the site prevents any meaningful discussion,” Freitag added.

The county currently is in the process of seeking funding for a phase-two brownfield study, which would identify any issues and establish remedies to restore the property.

Wehmeier said that in his experience, a phase-two brownfield study typically costs about \$20,000. That price, however, was quoted in the Chicago area for a much smaller site.

“Whatever you use that site for is going to have an impact,” Wehmeier added. “If you have residential, it’s going to have a higher requirement.”

Mayor Dale Oppermann added that for the city to continue expressed interest in the property, the county needs to make the phase-2 brownfield study its No. 1 priority and take responsibility for any damage it might have caused the site over the years.

“If the county made the mess, the county should be responsible for cleaning it up,” Oppermann said.

“It’s an attractive site, provided the environmental issues aren’t significant enough that the property cannot be redeveloped,” Freitag added.

Members of the committee expressed the belief that the Jefferson County Board of Supervisors is aware of issues that might devalue the land and are prepared to take responsibility.

“We now have to make it a clean site to put back into a reusable fashion,” Wehmeier said.

The city hopes to rework its downtown and riverfront redevelopment plan in the next six months as the plan largely has been untouched since its conception. The plan previously identified land uses and infrastructure requirements, but since 2006, Freitag said, things look a lot differently for the city, especially economically.

In 2010, the site of the old highway facility was added to the city’s TID 5, which the city would probably have to use for infrastructure needs and possible brownfield problems, Freitag said.

“The city is very interested in working with the county in an attempt to redevelop that property in the best interest of the city and the county, as well,” he said.

Those interests include mixed use of residential and retail lots, as Freitag noted that area is underserved as far as retail, but has a plethora of neighborhoods.

Wehmeier also brought attention to the potential need for housing that could be created by the proposed College of Osteopathic Medicine.

“The college site will not have enough housing for all of the staff and students, so there are going to be other impacts from that and this might be a convenient mid-location,” he said.

Wehmeier compared the situation in Jefferson to the campus of Carroll University in Waukesha, where a developer took a brownfield area near the campus and turned it into private dormitories.

"It's a close proximity, but far enough away that you could look at some mixed uses, as well," Wehmeier added. Freitag agreed noting that the city hopes to integrate the college campus into the city.

"We really don't want all of the housing sitting on the northeast side of town," he said.

We want to bring some of that into the city, and that may be a site that very well helps do that."

Wehmeier said he was not sure the value of the land but that it is likely worth a significant amount, which will be balanced out with possible demolition and environmental issues. There might, however, be opportunities to resalvage some of the existing materials. Jefferson County highway employees plan to move out of the old highway site in April with the completion of the new facility set for the beginning of March.

"One thing we are always looking at is how do we work with other governments within in the county in ways that will benefit us all as a whole," Wehmeier said.

"I think it is a benefit that we continue to work together as we move forward," he added.