

Officials look at bluff property

Firm to perform feasibility study for Caddo Center

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City Manager Jimmy Boit, right, talks with Dan Fowler of Cromwell Architect Engineers during a recent visit to the city's Ouachita River bluff property. The firm will be performing a study to determine how the property can best be developed.

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By Joe Phelps

Siftings Herald

For years, some Arkadelphia residents have dreamed of putting a museum of some sort on a high bluff that overlooks the Ouachita River. Most perceptions of what the museum would entail, however, differ slightly.

Now their dream of developing the land and turning it into a tourist attraction can become a reality.

The Arkadelphia City Board of Directors recently voted in favor of hiring Cromwell Architect Engineers, Inc., to perform a feasibility study on the bluff property, which the city now owns after a land swap with Ouachita Baptist University. The study will be funded mostly through grants from the Arkansas Department of Tourism and Southern Bancorp, for about \$32,000. The city will pay the rest of the money — about \$500 — owed to the Little Rock firm.

Cromwell representatives and consultants recently visited with

city officials at the bluff property, located about a quarter mile east of Highway 7.

The envisioned project has been called many things, from Caddo Nation Culture Center to De Soto Bluff (from legend that Hernando De Soto visited the bluff during his exploration through the area). Those in favor of the project say such a center would attract tourists throughout the U.S. and would benefit Arkadelphia in terms of its tourism economy.

But is the project doable?

Some argue that the bluff's bank is washing away, therefore making it too much of a risk to invest in developing the land. Vice Mayor Ann Sanders in Thursday's City Board meeting pointed out the condition of the bank and said the city made a poor decision with the 26-acre land swap with OBU.

Cromwell's job will be to find out what kind of service can be delivered at the property. The study will define the project, narrowing down the ideas people have and creating a mission statement. A

program description will be finalized, establishing the goals, themes and messages of the possible museum. Also, a conceptual floor plan will be drawn, and an estimate will be made for the construction and operation cost of the project.

The study will also determine the market audience and how the operation could be funded and staffed. In general, the study will look into the economic impact it could have on the area. City Manager Jimmy Bolt called it a "simple economic impact report. We can't do a full-blown economic impact report, but generally speaking it will answer what we could see." He said the study will answer what the property's best and highest use is and "if we can afford not to develop it."

The study's deadline is early summer, and Bolt said a draft of the final study (feedback from what the firm has seen so far) will be complete within two weeks.

Bolt said the firm's representatives "were pretty excited" about the project during their recent visit.

"They did say it would take some type of extra funding, but no museum has ever paid for itself." Bolt said either a non-profit organization or a philanthropist foundation could fund the project.

He said the bank's erosion would not set the plans back for a museum. "Unless we go through extraordinary measures to keep the land from eroding, we would never be able to build anything right on the bluff. Everything is designed to take advantage of the view and the environment without being right there on the edge of the bluff."

He said the public is welcome to have a look at the property. It can be accessed by walking the quarter-mile trail to the bluff (there is an aluminum gate at the trail's entrance, on the east side of Highway 7 next to Car Mart) or by a trail that is connected to Feaster Trail.

Those who venture out to the property should be careful, though, because the property is perched 120 feet directly above the Ouachita River.