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Competition produces designs for rehabbing Irish Hill

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Michael Espenan of the Cherokee Triangle thinks a 30-acre former scrap-metal site on Lexington Road in Irish Hill could become a neighborhood transit center and mixed-use area that would preserve the historic sections of Beargrass Creek.

It was one of 20 concepts — including plans from Lexington, Ky., Seattle, Paris, New York and London — in an exhibit Oct. 15 of entries in the Irish Hill Neighborhood Association's Mediative Urbanisms design competition for the site. The exhibit was at The Green Building on East Market Street.

The competition was held to generate new ideas after developer Steve Poe withdrew a controversial proposal for a mixed-use commercial development to be called The Crossings at Irish Hill. It would have realigned the creek across the back of the property.

The idea for the contest originated with architect Nathan Smith, who moved to Irish Hill from Puerto Rico about a year ago. "When Poe dropped out, it seemed like an ideal time to refresh the process" of assessing the site, said Smith, who grew up in Henry County.

The Paris team of Tetsuya Kawano and Julien Bouley won the \$2,000 first prize for a design that included an "urban agriculture" area, a multipurpose building along Lexington Road and a residential tower that the designers said would become "a symbolic link between the site and the city centre."

Judges were J. Michael McCoy, director of planning for the Center for Neighborhoods; architect Chris Bowling; Jason Scroggin, assistant professor of architecture at the University of Kentucky; Bruce Scott, with Kentucky Waterways Alliance; and architect Barb Sinai.

McCoy said he was especially struck by several designs that included an ongoing process and new features to help clean up the site. People would "watch it being done," he said.

The \$1,000 second prize went to a team from Norway, and the third-place winner, titled "Confluence," was by the team of Mike Smiley, Jodi Smiley and Sarah Kopke of Environs Inc. in Middletown and R. Gant Jones of Jones Design in Anchorage. It includes a community plaza, grocery and bike lanes. Smiley described it as a "challenging site" where the Middle and South forks of the creek meet and a "nexus" of several neighborhoods. The aim was to "pull the city together" at that point and protect the creek, he said.

The site is made up of two tracts, the larger of which is owned by River Metals Recycling on River Road. River Metals attorney Wanda Repasky said the property is for sale again, but the company has received no offers on it.

David Karem, executive director of the Waterfront Development Corp., called the exhibit ideas "extremely exciting," saying he could visualize a "wonderful corridor" stretching from the Waterfront Park area through East Main and Market streets to Lexington Road and Cherokee Park. "It's a fabulous opportunity for some developer and for the city," he said.

Charles Cash, director of Metro Planning & Design Services, said organizers should show the winning concepts to city economic-development officials. "Most people were trying to design a mixed-used neighborhood center," which Irish Hill doesn't really have, he said. He also said the city supports the idea of connecting Irish Hill to neighborhoods to the north.

Developer Jim Boland of Boland-Maloney Lumber Co., which has a site on East Main Street, said he had considered the Irish Hill property for apartments but decided they would be too expensive given the price of the land, which was \$1.3million for the larger 20-acre tract several years ago.

The exhibit concepts were "ambitious," and a new development there "could be a citywide attraction, for sure," he said.

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COVER PHOTO: A mixed-use development is one idea proposed for 30 acres of industrial land on Lexington Road. The design was one of 20 submitted in a competition initiated by architect Nathan Smith.