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Group vows to press on with river walk plan

Efforts to gain public support continue

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Regardless as to whether the city of Norfolk is financially able to help fund a riverfront development study this year, that decision will not doom the dream of a group of river supporters.

After all, the idea of utilizing the recreational and aesthetic water resource that is represented by the controlled flow of North Fork River has survived previous financial and political challenges.

A major environmental and resource development study of the river corridor was written in the 1970s, and the city actually acquired many potential development acres along the corridor with an eye toward future development. Then other priorities came along.

Now a group of community leaders — headed by former mayor Jim Miller — is re-floating the 30-year-old idea.

Miller, as well as others who have been working since last summer to rebuild support for the river development concept, expressed some frustration at their meeting Tuesday over opposition and concerns they have heard about the idea. But they vowed to press on in efforts to get more public support.

AT THE CENTER of the current discussion is the need to raise \$320,000 to fund an engineering study and an updated comprehensive plan for the corridor.

The NorthFork Development board has asked the city to budget \$80,000 in each of the next two fiscal years to match a like amount they expect to raise from private sources and other entities.

The group has already generated more than \$55,000 in cash and pledges toward the effort.

Darrell Novacek, who has been heading up the fundraising committee for the group, has put his solicitation team on hold until city council members finalize the 2008-09 budget.

That's because potential contributors want to know if the city is on board and endorses the concept — either financial

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FORMER NORFOLK MAYOR

ly or by resolution, Novacek said.

He and fellow board member Joe Ferguson both said they were confident the money to fund the river study could be raised from other sources, but that it would be much harder without a city contribution and nearly impossible without a municipal endorsement.

"This is a good project," Miller said. "It will go forward at some point. It just may take us longer (without a city budget appropriation)."

It's not just a plan to build a sidewalk along the stream, they explained. It's not a plan to disrupt homes and businesses. It's not just a dirty drainage ditch.

ONCE WRITTEN, the plan will prompt environmental enhancements and could become the impetus for private development along the corridor, which has been the case with similar situations in numerous other communities with a river resource.

The development supporters are planning a general public meeting on Tuesday, Aug. 26, to present concepts as outlined by the prospective engineering firm — HDR Consultants of Omaha — selected to conduct the study and draft the plan.

The open meeting is planned for 5 p.m. at Grace Community Church in downtown Norfolk.

Miller said he hopes city council members will see the need to "stand up and be a participant in this public and private partnership."

Novacek said it will be disappointing if they don't help fund the effort, "but I just can't imagine them not supporting the concept of this project."