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Studies outline prison future

But many questions remain to be answered

CONCORD — Home until last year of a state prison, the former Lakes Region Facility property on North Main Street and Meredith Center Road, Laconia, has some possible environmental problems, great views and "a lot" of developable land, according to consultants who have studied the tract.

Soon after the N.H. Department of Corrections closed the Laconia prison on June 30, 2009, in a move to save the state some \$5 million annually, the Commission to Evaluate Long-term Uses of Lakes Region Facility began working on its charge to recommend to the governor the highest and best use for the 212-acre campus.

Meeting in Concord on Thursday, the commission heard from representatives of Vita Nuova, SRA and Credere Associates which together presented a preliminary reuse and opportunities and constraints analysis; a "Phase I" environmental assessment; and a market analysis.

The commission, which must conclude its work by next July, is planning to hold an "outreach" and information session in Laconia in mid-September.

Elaine Richardson of Vita Nuova said that, based on traffic studies from more than a decade ago, the property might not be the ideal place for a retail center, noting that the 10,000 daily vehicles recorded paled when compared to the 50,000 that a typical Wal-mart expects.

She added that another consideration in developing the property is that, because of their age, some of the more than two dozen buildings on the site may have to be assessed for historic preservation.

Along with the N.H. Department of Health and Human Services, which operates a sex offender unit on the campus, the Lakes Region Mutual Fire Aid Association dispatch center is a current tenant and it has another five years left on its lease with the state, said Richardson. She noted that, with more than \$1 million invested in its operations, the dispatch center might be expected to seek a lease extension.

Pointing to a map of the property, Richardson said she and her colleagues see a lot of maps in their line of work but "this is one of the most unique maps I've seen in a long time," with 188 acres ultimately being developable.

"We've got a lot of land here," she said.

Rip Patten of Credere Associates said the Phase I environmental review found that a second, more in-depth review is probably in order. Phase I found the likelihood of gasoline-contaminated soils; underground or above-ground tanks containing petroleum products; a possible chlorination plant; and the presence of PCBs in the electrical equipment and asbestos in the

buildings.

A Phase I study might be sufficient to meet the commission's charge, the consultants said, but, if the property were to be offered to a private developer, he or she would require the Phase II review which could be costly and time-consuming.

As to possible uses, Richardson said she saw possible "growth clusters" in retail, healthcare, diversified manufacturing, information industries and several other areas of opportunity.

She also noted weaknesses and threats in the outlook for the development of the property, including the lack of affordable housing in the city.

The former Lakes Region Facility does have a lot of land that Richardson, based on discussions with four local real estate brokers, calculated has a cumulative worth in the current market of more than \$4 million.

However, there is no immediate rush to buy that land, she added, because of the large number of properties already on the market or in the development pipeline.
