

Federal courthouse at the Riverfront Y site?

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Now that Congress has approved a \$137 million plan to build a new federal courthouse in Des Moines, the big question is: Where will the facility be located?

The front-runner seems to be a site on the east bank of the Des Moines River just north of Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway. The city of Des Moines and its partners have proposed a five-block parcel there for a new courthouse.



(Photo: Joel Aschbrenner/The Register)

But now, a dark horse has emerged. Hubbell Realty Co. has proposed the former Riverfront YMCA site at 101 Locust St. for the courthouse project. Hubbell, which purchased the 1.8-acre parcel this fall, has been trying to figure out what to do with the land. CEO Rick Tollakson said federal officials asked him to submit the site as a possible location for the courthouse.

Federal officials won't say how many sites have been submitted. A selection committee is scheduled to pick a site this spring and the federal government will try to acquire the land by next fall. Construction would begin in 2019 and the courthouse would open in 2022.

The Riverfront Y has some selling points. It is a marquee location with riverfront access — two criteria federal judges are said to want in a new courthouse. And a courthouse would seem like a natural fit among the public buildings lining that stretch of the river, like City Hall, the World Food Prize building and the existing federal courthouse.

But the city site on the east bank of the river does seem to hold one key advantage: the ability to spur additional development.

The city's proposal includes about two blocks for the courthouse and three adjacent blocks for private development. The site is part of the Market District, the gritty industrial area on the

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south side of East Village that is slowly being converted from warehouses and scrapyards to offices and apartments.

For years, city leaders have said a new courthouse could provide an anchor for the Market District and fast-track those effort to redevelop the area. In fact, a 2010 city plan envisioned a federal courthouse on the exact same site.

Partners in the city's proposal include MidAmerican Energy, which owns some of the land, and local real estate developer and businessman Jim Cownie.

At the Riverfront YMCA site, meanwhile, it's hard to imagine a courthouse sparking new development. Properties surrounding the Y site are already fully developed.

Erin Olson Douglas, an economic development coordinator for the city, said she wouldn't object to the Riverfront YMCA site, but thinks a new courthouse would do the most good in the Market District.

"We feel it is a better place for the project to serve as a catalyst for the redevelopment of downtown properties," she said.

Olson Douglas also said the city would like to see a private development at the Riverfront Y site that generates property taxes and brings more activity to the riverfront with things like restaurants or retailers.

Tollakson said a courthouse is not necessarily his top pick for the site. Hubbell is considering several options, including private development, for the site.