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## Marion seeks \$24 million from state to revamp downtown

Proposal for Central Corridor features rejuvenated square, new library, hotel



*Pedestrians and cars on Seventh Avenue in Marion on Monday. (Cliff Jette/The Gazette)*



**Rick Smith**

*The Gazette*

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MARION — Big plans for the city’s Central Corridor now are in the hunt for \$24 million in state funds that would help rejuvenate City Square Park and build a new, larger downtown library with a grocery store and apartments next to it and a new 140-room hotel with convention center.

In total, the Marion Central Corridor Reinvestment District proposal anticipates \$118.6 million in public and private investment, with eight projects contributing to it along a stretch through the city more than a mile long.

Among those projects also is a mixed-used development of stores, eight residential units and a 440-space parking ramp at Eighth Avenue and 11th Street.

The proposed \$26.7 million, four-story hotel with convention center is targeted for a spot on the east end of the Reinvestment District between 27th and 31 streets, where Sixth Avenue will flow into Seventh Avenue at a roundabout to be built in the next two years.

“I think it’s fabulous,” Nick Glew, president of the Marion Economic Development Co., said Monday. “As a community, there have been various organizations and private landowners for the last several years positioning the corridor for a project like this.

“... This reinvestment district really gives us the opportunity as a community to capitalize on the hard work of lots of people who are ready to invest significant dollars in Marion.”

But the ambitious Marion proposal is in for a fight with proposals from seven other cities — including Coralville’s proposed \$40-million project announced last week that features a 7,000-seat arena.

Tina Hoffman, marketing and communications director for the Iowa Economic Development Authority (IEDA), on Monday said the state’s Reinvestment District Program has \$41.5 million left in its original \$100 million funding pot. The eight new proposals submitted by the March 15 deadline are seeking a total of \$118.8 million among them, she said.

The state program is designed to let cities use 4 cents of the state’s 6 cents in sales tax generated by new businesses in a reinvestment district, and the 5 cents in state hotel/motel tax generated in the district for up to 20 years to help finance the proposal. The state funds cannot pay more than 35 percent of the project’s total cost.

In addition to Marion’s request for \$24.06 million in funding:

I Coralville is seeking \$12 million

I Cedar Falls, \$9.2 million

I Davenport, \$21.8 million

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I Grinnell, \$8 million

I Mason City, \$9.8 million

I Sioux City, \$13.9 million

I Waukee, \$20 million.

Hoffman said the IEDA will score the projects based on a list of criteria, including uniqueness and transformational quality. The state agency will make provisional awards to some projects on June 1, she said.

Lon Pluckhahn, Marion's city manager, on Monday said Marion believes its proposal is unique among the proposals and worthy of funding, particularly so because of the plan's feature that would bring programming to Marion's central downtown park some 250 days a year, he said.

"It's very hard to find something in the Corridor or the state of Iowa that isn't something somebody else has," Pluckhahn said. "When you look around Iowa, you can't find a plaza that has the level of programming behind it that we are planning, and that makes it a centerpiece of the community."

Pluckhahn said Marion's proposal will be refined as it makes its way through the IEDA process. Projects picked in June for provisional awards will have until March 1, 2016, to finalize their applications, IEDA's Hoffman said.

Pluckhahn said what the future will look like for the Marion library still must go through a public input process so the city knows what the public wants.

For now, he said an initial assessment has determined that it will cost less to build a new, larger library than to expand the existing library, built in 1996. But building new does not mean the current library will be demolished — a new library might go up on land between City Hall and the existing library, he said.

The proposed hotel is apt to be a business-class hotel such as a Hampton Inn or a Drury Inn & Suites, he said, while the downtown grocery store would be a neighborhood market, not a full-service grocery store.

Last June, the IEDA made provisional awards to three cities:

Des Moines proposes to use \$36.5 million in assistance for a \$181 million project featuring a \$130 million hotel and convention center; Muscatine wants to use \$10 million for a \$41 million project featuring a hotel and convention center and parking garage; and Waterloo will use \$12 million for a hotel and corporate training center, an industrial incubator and a privately funded John Deere Museum.

IEDA's Hoffman said the Waterloo project has secured final IEDA approval. Final consideration of the Muscatine project is expected later this month, with the Des Moines project likely to appear in front of the IEDA board in April, she said.

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