

Foraging for funds

□ Convention center plan nixed

By LAURIE BARNETT
News Staff Writer

When Howard Johnson dreams, he dreams big. He wants the city of Irving to share in his vision.

Johnson, a resident of Irving for 17 years, has plans for a \$120 million convention center complex that he says will boost the city's hotel revenue by 40 percent. He says he can pay most of the bill, but he wants the Irving Convention and Visitors Bureau to allocate about \$680,000 to cover the rest.

The ICVB board, however, agreed Tuesday that it will not commit any funding to the project.

"We have not seen a marketing plan or feasibility study. There is no feeling for the validity of the project without that sort of information," ICVB Executive Director Mike Benton told the board.

Benton said he had been asked by Councilman Harry Joe to respond to the request Johnson made before the City Council.

Johnson asked the council during a recent work session to prompt the ICVB to pledge to his project 25 percent of its annual bed-tax revenue — which would come to about \$680,000, based on current ICVB figures.

He also wants the city to waive all zoning and building-permit fees, because of the benefit he says the center will bring to the city.



Benton

The project would consist of a 500-seat convention center, a 400-room hotel, a Montessori-type child-care center, a 500-seat amphitheater, a substance-abuse center, a shelter for battered women, a medical office building, a senior-citizen apartment complex and a 50-foot lookout tower named after former Dallas Cowboys' coach Tom Landry, Johnson told the council.

"I feel like this is not a project of Howard Johnson, but a project

for the entire city of Irving," said Johnson, who calls himself a retired businessman. "It will have a big economic impact.

"I propose the hotels will raise 40 percent more for the city with the convention center here."

He told the council that he would use the city's bed-tax revenue to back the development bonds that would be used to fund the \$120 million project.

Johnson said in a phone interview after the meeting that he has been told by several council members that there would be no problem in having the city issue the bonds. The bonds will not cost the city anything, but would only show that Irving supports the project, he explained.

Joe said last week that he would not think about putting the city in the project based on the information he received during the work session.

"Based upon the presentation that he made and the scarcity of information, I could not commit the ICVB hotel revenues to jointly fund the project," he said. "I did not believe that this presentation contained the information I need to make an informed judgment."

Joe said Johnson refused to elaborate on the financing, marketing and construction plans for the project.

Johnson also did not say in the meeting where he plans to locate the project, but some say he is looking to build on 96 acres east of the intersection of state highways 183 and 114, northeast of Texas Stadium.

During the ICVB meeting, Chamber of Commerce President Bob Doan said that, in addition to Johnson, he has been approached by another man who wants to build a 1,200-seat sporting arena on the same property. Doan did not give the board any more detail, but said that while the city might not want to enter into a financial agreement with either of the men, the ICVB and the city should support the concept.

"We want to be cooperative, if they can make it happen," he said.

Councilman John Danish said at the council meeting that he thinks Irving could benefit from having a convention center, but said he wants to look closer at Johnson's plan before committing any money.

"I would support moving forward with finding out more about it," Danish said.

Mayor Bob Pierce said last week that he likes the proposal, but would not commit any city dollars to the project unless the plans are approved by city staff, the Planning and Zoning Commission and the City Council.

Johnson has yet to move forward with an application for rezoning, Pierce said. He said this is not the first time the council has heard about Johnson's plans.

"I don't know if he is for real or not," Pierce said. "I guess that will come out if he goes through rezoning."

Pierce, however, said he would prefer that a private group develop the convention center, which has long been a dream of city officials.

"I think private enterprise is better. Then, there would be no strings attached," he said.

Johnson said at the council work session that the substance-abuse center and shelter for battered women would be operated via contributions from local corporations. He said he already has received interest from the corporate community, but did not list any names.

"This (women's shelter) is a project that the city should be doing," he said, "(but) this way, you will not have the federal government telling you how to run it (as would be the case if federal funding is sought to pay for such a center)," Johnson told the council.

Johnson guaranteed the council that construction on the project would take no more than 18 months. He said tardiness would cost the project contractors "a ton of money."