A developer has a new plan for the long dormant Savannah River Landing site east of downtown, and construction of a mixed-use development could begin early next year — as long as the economy cooperates this time.

Savannah River Landing Land JV, LLC is under contract to purchase the property pending approval of a new master plan to build residential, retail, hospitality and office space on the 56-acre site that lies between the Savannah River and East President Street. Approval could mean the resumption of work on what was expected to be an extension of the Historic District before the 2008 recession brought construction to a halt — leaving a network of unused roads and utility lines behind with no buildings in place.

The new plan, which is scheduled to be presented to the Chatham County-Savannah Metropolitan Planning Commission on Tuesday, retains the previous project’s grid street pattern and also provides public space for parks and squares, including a strip of greenspace along the extended Savannah Riverwalk.

There are some differences from the previous plan, however, which will also have to be approved by Savannah City Council. The proposed lot and block sizes are larger to be more “user friendly,” while the proposed heights for the buildings — which range between 60 to 180 feet — are scaled back from President to River Street, rather than having the taller buildings by the waterfront, said the owner’s attorney, Harold Yellin.

The proposed zoning designations are all mixed-use so that the more residential zones can also include some commercial space, and the more retail-oriented space can also accommodate housing, Yellin said.

“It’s designed to be like a downtown neighborhood environment,” he said.

The city’s priority was that the development retain connectivity to the Historic District, while maximizing public space and preserving access to the riverwalk, said Bret Bell, deputy assistant to the city manager. The new plan meets those goals, even though there was a lot of pressure for a gated community, Bell said.

“That is one thing we did not want,” he said. “We wanted this to be a part of Savannah.”

The property’s contracted buyer is a joint venture of two Atlanta-based companies, Mariner Group and Regent Partners. The Mariner Group recently built the $41 million Mariner Grover apartment complex along East President about two miles to the east of Savannah River Landing.

The city is counting on the development to generate increased property tax revenue that will help cover the cost of city-funded projects in the area, including the ongoing raising of President Street and General McIntosh Boulevard and the widening of the Bilbo Canal for flood mitigation.

The city is still determining whether to fund some additional public projects — including a parking garage and the extension of the River Street trolley rail line — that the increased tax revenue could also help pay for, Bell said.
Yellin said the developer is planning to begin construction early next year, but at least one veteran member of the Savannah City Council is keeping his optimism in check. Savannah Alderman Tony Thomas, who served on the council when the original plan was adopted, said he welcomes the investment and potential tax revenue it could generate for the city, but he won’t be convinced the project is moving forward until he sees construction taking place.

“I hope it’s not another pipe dream,” Thomas said. “We don’t need to sit here another decade with a big-boxed area with nothing on it.”
On March 14, the Chatham County-Savannah Metropolitan Planning Commission will consider new plans and possibilities for the Savannah River Landing site at the east end of River Street.

According to reporting by Eric Curl last week, Savannah River Landing Land JV, LLC, plans to purchase the 56-acre property if the prospective buyers can get approval for a new master plan for residential, retail, hotel and office development.
It's been about a decade since the original plans for Savannah River Landing collapsed, and the prospect of major private development on the site might seem exciting for a variety of reasons.

With development at Savannah River Landing, we can generate additional property tax revenue to fund infrastructure improvements in the area and boost government coffers generally. If the site is truly developed for mixed uses and doesn't become a sea of hotels, SRL might bring some much-needed diversity to the downtown economy, which has become increasingly dependent on tourism.

Given the economic potential, it's possible that some officials with the MPC and the city of Savannah will be anxious to approve any development at the long dormant site.

But this isn't a sprint. We need to take the time to ask hard questions.

Savannah River Landing is one of the most important parcels of land in the city. It has extensive river frontage and is immediately adjacent to our gorgeous Landmark Historic District. The site was platted by Savannah founder General James Oglethorpe.

When development of the acreage was considered over a decade ago, urban planner Christian Sottile was hired to extend our existing network of streets and squares so that Savannah River Landing would be a logical and potentially beautiful extension of the Oglethorpe plan.
In preparation for major development, the riverwalk was extended, fill dirt from the Ellis Square project was used to raise the elevation and major work on nearby roads began.

The impending development of Savannah River Landing caught the attention of planners and architects from around the world.

“With a conventional master plan, which often foresees all of the buildings from Day 1,” Sotmile told the New York Times in 2007, “you freeze in time the mix of uses. This is the opposite. It’s town-building. The streets come first, public spaces come first, and the blocks become spaces for building, which are not prescribed. It’s highly unusual for American cities.”

Sotmile’s plan included design elements generally consistent with the existing Historic District fabric – the pacing of squares, the frequency of streets and the sizes of lots. We would have seen more commercial development near the west side of the site, with more residential development farther east.

The master plan that will be considered next week by the MPC utilizes much of Sotmile’s planned street grid, but there would be fewer and smaller squares. The blocks would be configured for larger scale development.

The new master plan for the privately owned site probably makes more economic sense, at least in the short run, than the Sotmile plan. The potential developers will likely see a higher return on investment if less space is devoted to the public realm and the parcels are more suitable for intense development.
Readers of this column know that I have long advocated for greater density in the downtown area, and significant residential development at Savannah River Landing could be great news for the economy of River Street and of the Historic District generally.

Still, local officials should scrutinize the proposed master plan, ask some hard questions and listen to voices from the community.

If our civic goal is rapid development over the relatively short term, the new plan might sail through the upcoming bureaucratic approval processes.

But maybe our civic goal is for Savannah River Landing to be a clear extension of the Oglethorpe’s incredibly resilient city plan. In that case, government officials and members of the public need to push the developers to align their vision more closely with the Sottile plan.

Again, I should emphasize that the site is privately owned, which obviously limits public control over Savannah River Landing’s future.

On the other hand, massive public resources have already been invested in and around the site. We are making decisions that will impact the city’s economy and culture for generations.