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TOP STORY

Freeport entities joining to form infrastructure plan

By Erinn Callahan erinn.callahan@thefacts.com Feb 8, 2017

FREEPORT — The port city is following the lead of a nearby city and developing a comprehensive plan to address aging and failing infrastructure, as well as attract businesses and development.

Council members agreed at a meeting Monday to chip in \$70,000 to hire Sugar Land-based Kendig Keast Collaborative to design the city's 20-year comprehensive master plan.

The city will share the \$210,000 cost with Port Freeport and the Freeport Economic Development Corp., Economic Development Director Jennifer Hawkins said.

Both entities previously agreed to pay a share of the costs, she said.

"Since the port does share our city, we want the port on board for the planning and cost," Hawkins told council members. "They have agreed."

Kendig Keast caught the eye of EDC board member Roy Yates last year when they designed a similar plan in Lake Jackson, and he hoped to see the company duplicate its success in Freeport.

"I was real impressed with what they did over there," Yates said. "Somebody who knows what they're doing needs to come in here."

The master plan would replace the city's previous iteration, which was designed in 2000 and did not address Freeport's more pressing issues, such as drainage and infrastructure, Yates said. Drainage has long been a headache for the city, with heavy rains frequently overwhelming the pump stations and sweeping water into residents' homes.

"This was basically a beautification plan. It had nothing to do with infrastructure, parks, all the stuff we've all been talking about," Yates said. "This plan is totally different."

Along with a 20-member advisory board made up of city residents, Kendig Keast will draw up a design that incorporates infrastructure, traffic patterns, routes for port trucks to take and drainage, Hawkins said. The plan will include input gathered from residents during public meetings, she said.

"I know we've had a lot of master plans before but I don't think we've ever had one that was as comprehensive as this," Hawkins said. "It will not take away from any plans we already have on the table."

"One thing I like about this plan is it involves the entire city — there will be a lot of involvement. It's not going to be behind closed doors."

Concerned Citizens of Freeport member Ruben Renobato objected to the port's involvement, saying he thought the city would better have residents' interests at heart.

"I don't trust them simply because they have not lived up to the promises," he said. "I think we can do better with our money."

Port and city officials often are at odds on certain issues, Yates said, but collaboration is key in developing and executing the city's master plan.

Mapping out the city's future will mean development in both the residential and commercial spheres, which will result in a much-needed boost to the tax base — all the more crucial with the shuttering of Gulf Chemical and Metallurgical Corp. in April, he said.

"That's going to cost the city \$300,000 in tax money ... my idea is, we've got to get people living here. It's never going to go anywhere if people keep moving away from here," Yates said. "It's not going to be easy, it's not going to be cheap, everybody is not going to be happy, but we've got to try to get everybody together."

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