

STEAM Learning Center feasibility study to be presented to DeKalb City Council

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DeKALB – The prospect of a multimillion dollar science, technology, engineering, arts and math learning center in downtown DeKalb is getting high praise ahead of the presentation of a feasibility study Monday, but would require a \$4 million investment from the city.

Northern Illinois University, the DeKalb Firefighter’s Historical Foundation and Proudly DeKalb worked with the city on a plan to construct [a nearly 35,000-square-foot structure](#) that would provide services and resources that might not be available in schools or libraries. The DeKalb City Council approved a study in June to determine how to move forward with the project.

“I am struck by the truly inspiring legacy of learning that permeates the boundaries of Northern Illinois University and into our community, and I believe the STEAM Learning Center is the next step in fostering that legacy,” DeKalb Mayor John Rey said in a statement. “There will be positive impact on the atmosphere of downtown with activity carried over into businesses located nearby.”

The center’s operating budget is estimated to be between \$200,000 and \$500,000 for the first three years, as much as \$1.2 million for years three to five, and more than \$2.5 million going into the 10th year.

After reviewing 11 possible locations for the building, the project team selected two sites based on parking availability, visibility, room for expansion and consistency with [the city’s downtown revitalization plans](#).

By being near the Egyptian Theatre and DeKalb Public Library, the STEAM Learning Center’s construction would create a “cultural triangle” within the downtown area, according to the study.

The study also provides three financing methods for each location: a nonprofit development, a public-private partnership development and a city development.

The first site is the NIU-owned Monat Building at 148 N. Third St. It would cost about \$12.8 million to build at this location.

A not-for-profit plan would require \$4 million in tax increment financing funding for construction and another \$8.8 million from a capital fundraising campaign. The city development option is similar to this, but the project would be under city ownership.

The public-private partnership would require \$4 million in TIF funds and a private developer to provide \$3 million in equity and obtain a \$5.8 million loan for the remaining project costs.

The second site is at the privately owned Mooney property on 204 N. Fourth St., which is roughly twice the size of the Monat property. Construction costs at this location would be about \$11.3 million.

With an additional story not needed for the STEAM Learning Center, this location offers the chance for another business to operate within the property. The operating potential of the second floor then can be used by a private developer to help contribute to the center's construction costs.

The study recommends that the center appoint an executive director and board of directors to oversee activities and make decisions on policy. The study said it is imperative for NIU to be a major partner in the long-term development and operation of the center.

NIU President Doug Baker said in a letter of support that although the university is not in a position to provide substantial monetary backing to the project, it will support efforts through the participation of NIU staff in the planning process, assignment of NIU STEAM Works staff for support, encouraging NIU students and staff to participate in the center's planning, and fundraising to support NIU activities at the center.

An assumed construction date for the project is March 2018. It would be substantially complete no later than February 2019. The hope is for the center to take advantage of nearby manufacturing and science industry markets by drawing talented workers in scientific fields to DeKalb.

The study will be presented at the City Council's Committee of the Whole meeting at 5 p.m. Monday and the DeKalb Municipal Building, 200 S. Fourth St.

The project has gained the support of the DeKalb County Convention and Visitors Bureau, DeKalb County Economic Development Corp., DeKalb Park District, DeKalb Area Arts Council, DeKalb Chamber of Commerce, DeKalb Area Agricultural Heritage Association, Egyptian Theatre and DeKalb Public Library, among others.

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