

Beale District Future Mapped Out in Report

By Bill Dries

Whatever comes next for the Beale Street entertainment district, the city of Memphis isn't likely to turn over the three blocks of real estate for several decades to a developer and the nonprofit middleman, [Beale Street Development Corp.](#)



Memphis Mayor A C Wharton Jr. got a formal briefing Monday on a report by the Beale Street Strategic Planning Committee. (Daily News File Photo: Lance Murphey)

But the city also doesn't expect to make a lot of money on the district and what it does make will likely go back into the development of Beale Street as a historical and cultural force alongside its commercial role as an entertainment district.

That will require a better definition of what Beale Street's musical heritage is and whether accentuating that adds to or detracts from its commercial impact.

Memphis Mayor A C Wharton Jr. got a formal briefing Monday, March 25, on a report by the Beale Street Strategic Planning Committee he assembled in 2011. The report had been boxed up since 2011 pending a settlement of the bankruptcy case involving

Performa Entertainment, the manager and developer of the district. The bankruptcy settlement is part of the exit of Performa from its role.

The report by the 31-member group concludes visitors to Beale Street want all the history and culture of the street where the blues was born as well as a good time.

“But it is not realistic to put the full burden of presenting that history on the businesses that make up what is now essentially an entertainment district,” the report reads in its recommendation of a new nonprofit entity to be a watchdog of the street’s tradition and culture.

The 58-page report makes clear that a future nonprofit organization should be separate from the management of the district and focus exclusively on presenting the history and culture of the street.

“All agree, though for differing reasons, that the [Beale Street Development Corporation](#) ... has failed to live up to its potential as the protector and presenter of the District’s history,” the report continues. “City leaders envisioned that role for BSDC, but BSDC simply hasn’t met anyone’s expectations – including the organization’s own.”

The new nonprofit would raise money to support activities that support the telling of the district’s history including special events, production of a documentary film, tours of the district and a website with historical information.

While some in the group advocated an adherence to authentic blues, others in the group argued what is authentic is hard to define and even harder to balance with what tourists want to hear while they are having a good time, which isn’t always the blues.

Wharton termed it a “constructive tension” in which a business owner might fill his or her place for karaoke but not do as well with a purist’s version of the blues.

“We see that and we know that we are going to have to deal with that,” Wharton told the merchants gathered at A. Schwab to hear the report. “I much prefer to have an entity in which there are tensions than one that is just lackluster.”

[Terry Saunders](#), co-owner of the general store, said an expansion of the district into something more than bars and nightlife is warranted by the customers she sees.

“The devil’s in the details. But we certainly buy in to almost everything I heard today,” she said. “We are already doing it and know from personal experience that people love to know all about the Delta, the Delta culture, Beale Street history. ... They love smelling this place. They love everything old about it.”

The mayor’s group also recommended increased oversight by the city “directly or indirectly” of Beale Street’s management in whatever form it takes. The group recommended either a new for-profit management firm or a business improvement district like the Downtown Memphis Commission.

The committee rejected the idea of the city selling some or all of the Beale Street properties to tenants, saying it is “not in the best long-term interest of the district.”

The reasoning was that the city would be required to take public bids whether the properties were sold individually or as a whole. The city couldn't pre-select a buyer under those conditions. And many of the tenant businesses have long-term leases anyway.

The report recommends that if the city goes the route of another private for-profit manager that the initial lease of contract term be no more than five years. It's a timeframe Wharton agreed with immediately. And Wharton said he's open to discussion but at the outset of a discussion with the Memphis City Council, he is leaning toward a management company.

The initial lease with [Beale Street Development Corp.](#), which in turn subleased Beale Street to what became Performa Entertainment, was 50 years starting in 1982.

Performa founder and developer John Elkington has maintained that such a long lease was necessary for anyone to take a chance on developing Beale Street in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the district was behind chain-link fences and older buildings were crumbling.