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Sleiman sees more redevelopment plans for the Landing

This time from high school students in the ACE Mentor Program. If he likes what he sees, he says he will build it.

by: [Andrew Warfield](#) | Staff Writer

About 16 weeks ago, a Request for Proposals was distributed for redevelopment plans for the Jacksonville Landing.

On Friday, Toney Sleiman, owner of the Landing, heard the pitches delivered at the University of North Florida University Center.

From high school students.

The annual ACE (Architecture, Construction, Engineering) Mentor

About ACE

The ACE Mentor Program of America helps students in their pursuit of careers in design and construction. It involves more than 8,000 students annually.

Founded during the 2006-07 school year, ACE Mentor Program of Northeast Florida helps high



The program treats a project as a real RFP. High school teams submit a preliminary plan with a budget and spend four months developing the proposal.

ACE is a national program brought to Jacksonville in 2006 by Haskell, an architecture, engineering, construction and consulting firm. This year, the local chapter has more than 30 sponsors and is led by a board of 20 members of the education and engineering and development communities.

Five teams from Creekside, Lee, Middleburg and Orange Park high schools and of home-schoolers competed before a panel of judges — and Sleiman himself.

They presented their proposals for redevelopment of the Downtown landmark, which is embroiled in lawsuits between the city and the Sleiman Enterprises-owned Jacksonville Landing Investments LLC.

The parties are litigating over parking, maintenance, management and occupancy issues, each citing the other as the cause for the poor condition of the property.

The city filed a lawsuit against Sleiman last October over the condition and occupancy of the buildings he



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in land leased from the city. It cites a lack of quality tenants intended to draw business Downtow

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Sleiman countersued, accusing the city of failing to maintain the riverfront outside the buildings, blocking access to the Landing by building a roundabout at Laura Street and Independent Drive, and providing inadequate parking.

Thursday, though, was about possibilities. Sleiman said he was eager to see what the high school students came up with.

engineering.

Through the program, local industry professionals serve as mentors, meeting with students for two hours a week for 16 weeks. During these sessions, students work in teams to create practical solutions for real-world projects, allowing them to experience what professionals in the field do during a typical workday.



Jacksonville Landing owner Toney Sleiman.

“I learned about this last week,” Sleiman said. “I think I am going to learn something new. If I see something I
n going to go for it. If a teenager has an idea that I like, I’m doing it.”

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Plans presented Thursday weren’t the first Sleiman has seen for redevelopment of the Landing.

He purchased the buildings from the city in 2003 for \$5.1 million and leased the land beneath them from the city through 2056. Since then, he said he has been trying to redevelop the site.

“I’ve been dragged along for 15 years with 20 different plans and I’ve spent lots of money listening to everybody and we haven’t gotten anywhere yet, so I am just going to keep pushing forward,” Sleiman said Thursday. “The lawsuit will bring out a lot. There are going to be a lot of interesting things that we’re learning about.

“I going to say this: The truth will come out,” he said.

Sleiman said the city has ignored the core of Downtown and the area around the Landing. The property also is caught up in a 2015 lawsuit between the city and Jacksonville Landing Investments over unpaid property taxes and the purchase of an adjacent parking lot.

“I want to redevelop it,” said Sleiman. “I’ve been saying that for 15 years. I want to redevelop it. I need my parking. There are agreements for parking and city’s never followed it. I want things to happen and I want to redevelop it.”



“It’s a very important location,” Sleiman said. “We’ve given away millions and millions of dollars all around Downtown, but we do nothing for the core. We do nothing for home plate. And there I am sitting at home plate and they bypass me and there’s no cooperation. It’s just battle after battle and it’s a shame because the people of Jacksonville are the ones suffering.”

Once he is in position to redevelop the Landing, Sleiman said he may be incorporating at least some ideas expressed by the teams of high school architectural and development firms.

“I know I am going to see something I never thought about,” he said. “Young people have this enthusiasm. They have so much energy and can look at things a whole different way.”

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