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Ideas cooked up for factory

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Christopher Anderson
Express-News Staff Writer

A group of historic preservation officials and activists from across the country see something sweet happening again at the old Judson Candy Co. building, although they expect it will take millions of dollars to make the complex tempting to tenants.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation held its annual leadership training program in San Antonio this week, and its almost three dozen participants were asked to come up with ideas on how the former praline, chocolate and jelly bean factory at 831 S. Flores St. can be reused.

Located in the King William area, the site includes two historic, graffiti-marred buildings that have been vacant since 1999, when the company, now known as Judson-Atkinson Candies, moved to the Northeast Side.

Five teams comprising seven people each, including representatives from state agencies and local nonprofit groups, presented proposals on what should be done with the old factory site Friday evening at the Southwest School of Art & Craft.

All of them advocated creating condominiums or loft apartments in at least one of the existing buildings.

Their recommendations also included such novel approaches as creating a community fitness center or a working school for college students interested in the hospitality industry.

Other suggestions included introducing a much-needed grocery store for the area.

Another popular plan was to develop a rooftop garden to help keep air-conditioning costs low and to provide great vistas of the downtown area from the fourth floor of the larger of the two buildings.

A majority of the plans also called for a relatively recent warehouse addition to be



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razed.

"I think a lot of them had great ideas with amenities that they wanted to offer which are great," said Patrick Shearer, a principal in the Cambridge Realty Group, which is representing the site's owner, Tony Bradfield. He is asking \$3.3 million for the property.

Shearer noted that all the plans crafted by the group included considerable construction and renovation costs. "It is a big bite to chew off."

But Shearer expressed confidence that "the right developer" would capitalize on the site's proximity to downtown and Southtown by converting its historic buildings into new homes.

"I think all the demographics are pointing back to more urban living," he said.

Henry Alvarez, president and CEO of the San Antonio Housing Authority, which is studying the possibility of buying the factory site and developing it into a mix of affordable and market-rate housing, balked at the \$8 million to \$21 million project costs associated with the preservationists' plans.

"Some of the numbers are alarming," Alvarez said.

Don Rypkema, author of "The Economics of Historic Preservation: A Community Leader's Guide," said renovating a historic building is often less expensive than building from scratch.

"They're rarely cheap, but if quality is part of the equation, it will always be a competitive alternative," he said.

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