Ten months ago, plans for a 55-room hotel on the prime remaining piece of riverfront property in downtown Wabasha came undone.

There were many reasons why that plan ran aground, not least among them that the public didn’t think it was a great idea for the city-owned property, with its prime location on the Mississippi riverfront, adjacent to the popular National Eagle Center, to be used for that type of private development.

Some said, though, that it was a lost opportunity for an $8 million investment in the city.

Instead, it may turn out being a stroke of civic wisdom and good fortune. Last week, the Wabasha City Council approved a development agreement with the National Eagle Center for an expansion that would be part of a $17.79 million program of redevelopment for the riverfront. [The National Eagle Center hopes to raise $8.2 million from a capital fund drive. The city and the National Eagle Center in partnership hope to secure $9.595 million in state bonding.]

The center, one of the major tourism draws in Southeast Minnesota, is planning a 19,000-square-foot expansion that would take part of the site but also use historic buildings nearby. The center needs more space in part to show a 20,000-piece collection of eagle art that it received from a collector and is now in boxes in a warehouse.

The center would have a 30-year lease on part of the acreage, and the rest would be reworked as a focal point for city residents and visitors, possibly with an amphitheater and commercial boat dock for the paddlewheel cruise boats that often just cruise by.

All is dependent on fundraising and winning support for bonding from the Legislature. The project would involve $500,000 from the eagle center, a request for $8.2 million in state funding, and the remainder from the city. Architectural designs are due by next summer, and hopes are to begin construction in spring 2019.

There are question marks, as in all public-private projects of this kind, but as mapped out, it’s the kind of project that can be transformational for the heart of Wabasha, a historic town that’s older than the state of Minnesota and has always embraced the beauty and heritage of its splendid Mississippi riverfront.

That’s one reason the city has fought so ferociously and effectively to keep the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers from moving ahead with its massive sand-dumping plan. People care deeply about the small-town quality of life they have on the big river, and this project could be just what’s needed to preserve and celebrate that.