



Economy crimps plans for Springdale ballpark area

SPRINGDALE - A shortage of credit and capital is stalling plans to convert the land surrounding Arvest Ballpark into a regional signature destination for shopping, business and recreation, development consultants told Springdale officials last week.

Until the economy turns around, the city can prepare the area for development by identifying infrastructure needs, establishing uniform design standards, lobbying for changes in state law on tax incentives and deciding on anchor tenants.

"That site is going to bloom," said Charles Hodges of Dallasbased Hodges and Associates Architecture. "Look ahead, and sail into the head winds." Hodges discussed an envisioned 1,000-acre, mixed-use campus south of U.S. 412 along 56th Street. Even though the ballpark attracted as many as 30 percent of its visitors from outside Washington and Benton counties, it still needs private support if the taxpayer-supported \$50 million investment there is to pay long-term dividends, he said.

The Hodges firm, along with Danter Co. and Pizzuti Solutions, both of Columbus, Ohio, studied aspects of the minor-league baseball stadium and how it fits into the greater economy of Northwest Arkansas.

The consultants found that building a typical mall in the ballpark area could not compete with the shopping centers already in Fayetteville and Rogers, but a unique collection of interconnected venues could prosper.

Public art, trails, waterways based on drainage patterns, and a uniform building aesthetic could transform the cow pastures of today into tomorrow's diamond, the consultants said. Developments could include a medical complex, entertainment arena, a destination retailer like IKEA (which sells low-priced home furnishings), an IMAX cinema or a performing-arts center. Hodges said the development must be energy efficient, which would enhance its appeal and longevity.

The consultants suggested that developers seek joint ventures for funding and that limited-liability corporations be formed to finance and manage specific projects.

The plan anticipates a 20-year build-out, with an exit off Interstate 540 at Don Tyson Parkway.

But before anything can happen, the economy has to rebound.

"Quick is not possible right now," said Perry Webb, president of the Springdale Chamber of Commerce. "The economy is adding to the back of our timeline. We can't do anything until the economy picks back up." Webb and the chamber commissioned the \$250,000 study with the hope that a master plan by proven developers would help the local contingent "get it done, and do it right." Webb expects the preliminary plan unveiled Thursday to be finalized in about two weeks.

Chief among the 21 landowners in the proposed development area are the Tyson family, the Shaw Family Foundation, real estate agent Philip Taldo, and Gary George, chief executive officer of

George's Inc. Webb said the goal is to create a consensus among the landowners on how the land needs to be developed, and most are in "lockstep" with what Hodges and Associates, Pizzuti Solutions and Danter Co. have proposed.

"I think it has to be done," George said of the proposal. "The planning has to be done." He said, "The worst thing that can happen is that we have a lot of nice stuff, and something that's not nice is in the middle of it."

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