



SPRINGDALE Study:

Mixed use best near ballpark - later

SPRINGDALE - Plans to convert the land surrounding Arvest Ballpark into what would be touted as the region's signature destination for shopping, business and recreation are being stalled by a shortage of credit and capital, development consultants told Springdale officials on Thursday.

Until the economy turns around, Springdale 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 a 1,000-acre, mixed-use campus clustered 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.

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 be competitive with shopping centers already in Fayetteville and Rogers, but a unique collection of interconnected venues there 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 (low-priced home furnishings), an IMAX cinema or a performing arts center. Hodges said the development must be "green," or energy efficient, which would enhance the appeal and longevity of the project.

The consultants suggested 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 access enhanced by 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 time line. 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 Gary George, chief executive officer of George's Inc., the Tyson family, the Shaw family and real estate agent Philip Taldo. Webb said the goal is to create consensus among the landowners as to how the land needs to be developed, and most are in "lock step" with what Hodges, Pizzuti and Danter have in mind.

George, who was at Thursday's meeting, was asked by Alderman Jim Reed what he thought about the proposal.

"I think it has to be done," George said. "The planning has to be done." Reed pressed him a second time.

"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," George said.

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