

Olathe City Council Gives the Green Light to Developers to Proceed at the Great Mall Site!

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The Olathe City Council has unanimously approved rezoning the former Great Mall of the Great Plains site, giving a boost to a developer's vision to transform the property.

The Council on Tuesday endorsed the rezoning and preliminary plan for Mentum, a \$318 million mixed-use development on the old mall site at Interstate 35 and 151st Street. The concept calls for a 3,700-seat hockey arena, interactive golf facility, fitness center, other retail and entertainment uses, plus about 500 apartment units.

"This has the potential to be something truly special," Mayor Michael Copeland said. But hurdles still remain before the project can become a reality, including a decision by the Kansas Commerce Secretary on whether to authorize up to \$69.5 million in state tourism tax incentives to make the financing work.

The Commerce Department is weighing both the Olathe proposal and an Overland Park proposal for a different sports/entertainment arena, multi-sport complex and other mixed uses at the Bluhawk development, southwest of U.S. 69 Highway and 159th Street. However, Tuesday's vote was crucial for the Utah-based Woodbury Corp. development company to move forward with its ambitious plans, according to Joshua Woodbury, vice president of acquisitions.

"It certainly is a significant step because it allows us to be able to market the property for mixed use," Woodbury said after the council's vote. He said his company can now actively pursue tenants for the development.

Skeptics have questioned whether two similar arenas can survive financially within 10 miles of each other in southern Johnson County. Both Olathe and Overland Park are touting the merits of their plans as having the best chance of garnering state STAR bonds this year, intended to support major tourism destinations in Kansas.

Woodbury told the City Council on Tuesday night that Mentum will create a "vibrant family-friendly destination," focused on sports, wellness and fun, with youth hockey tournaments that will be a multi-state draw. He said Olathe also lacks sufficient restaurant and entertainment options that this new development can provide, while filling a 100-acre property left by a mall that opened in 1997 but closed in 2015.

Senior city planner Sean Pendley said Mentum's mixed uses are precisely what the city's comprehensive plan calls for at that vacant and demolished site. Tim McKee, CEO of the Olathe Chamber, urged council approval, saying this plan is far superior to any other ideas floated for that location, such as industrial or warehouse uses.

Woodbury said a key advantage is that his company will have Loretto Sports Ventures, a company owned by Lamar Hunt Jr., to provide the arena management and programming. The arena would house a junior league hockey team plus community ice rink space and would be the home base of Kansas City Youth Hockey Association.

"Hockey is our key partner," Woodbury said, adding that the relationship with Lamar Hunt Jr. was significant to the Utah company's decision to take on this huge Johnson County redevelopment project.

Hunt agreed the partnership with Woodbury, an experienced mixed-use development company, was key to Loretto's involvement in the project. He believes it's ideally suited to winning STAR bond approval.

"Mentum is the type of project that the STAR bonds were created for," Hunt told The Star on Wednesday. "We will draw dozens and dozens of youth hockey teams from throughout the Midwest. We will surpass Des Moines and Omaha and be competitive with St. Louis as far as youth hockey," he said.

Hunt, on the Kansas City Youth Hockey Association board, said this Olathe hockey arena would be the culmination of five years of planning to get more ice rinks in the bi-state metro area, where there's a pent-up demand for youth hockey. He said the association has more than 1,000 young people registered, continues to grow and the Olathe location is appealing. "Mentum is attractive to us because it's got great access," he said. "It's a great project for Olathe."

The next steps after this rezoning are the City Council's approval of a development agreement, expected by early March. That agreement would spell out all the public and private financing sources for the project, prospective tenants and other details of the public/private partnership with the city. The developer is also preparing a feasibility study to convince the Commerce Department of the project's financial viability.

Woodbury said he hopes that study and Commerce Secretary approval can come within a few months, to allow a groundbreaking for the new arena by June, with a grand opening slated for late 2020.