

Robstown outlet mall proposed

1,000 jobs, 70-80 stores, \$2.3M price tag for land

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\$50 million in construction, 70 to 80 stores, 350,000 square feet, 1,000 full- and part-time jobs.

The San Antonio-based private partnership that proposes to build the center has agreed to pay Nueces County nearly \$2.3 million for 45 acres next to the Richard M. Borchard Regional Fairgrounds. The land is appraised at \$922,500.

The site, according to the developers and their Corpus Christi-based real estate broker, offers these advantages:

- n A crossroads-traffic location at U.S. Highway 77 and State Highway 44 that could capture shoppers heading south to South Padre Island or Mexico.

- n Pre-zoned commercial, with infrastructure already laid, because the county government set it aside specifically for commercial development, foreseeing the intersection of highways as a hot corner.

- n Sufficient distance from non-outlet retail competitors.

- n Bypassing the Corpus Christi City Council, whose deliberations over the proposed Crosstown Commons shopping center had a chilling effect on the outlet mall investors. They backed off a Calallen location after seeing the heated debate over whether to grant tax incentives to the Crosstown Commons developers, said broker Matthew Cravey of NAI-Cravey Real Estate Services, who also represented the Crosstown Commons group.

The development company for the Robstown project, Dolphin Ventures I LLC, has chosen the name Outlets at Corpus Christi Bay. The enclave will include 70 to 80 outlet tenants, numerous restaurants and at least one hotel, said one of the three partners, Lisa Quier Wagner of Maryland.

The other partners are Rick Carduner, of Carduner Commercial in San Antonio, and Peter Edelmann, an outlet developer from Vermont. Dolphin Ventures became an official partnership Aug. 21 with the help of local attorney John D. Bell.

Bell also helped developers of Crosstown Commons create a partnership and represents the group. Bell said he also could represent Dolphin Ventures if the company chose. Bell said the developers of Crosstown Commons, on Corpus Christi's Westside near the Wal-Mart Supercenter on Greenwood Road, don't view the Robstown outlet mall as a head-to-head competitor because it is a different type of project.

Developers for Crosstown Commons could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

Dolphin Ventures has been visiting Corpus Christi since February and originally was looking at land near Calallen, but after officials observed the public debate over Crosstown Commons, they decided they didn't want to develop within city limits, Cravey said.

Cravey said he then took the developers to the proposed property at the intersection of Highway 77 and Highway 44, across the street from the Keach Family Library, and they were pleased with what they saw. In May, they met with county consultant Julie Wilsey and she informed them that the county had 45 acres available.

Carduner also is the Texas director of the International Council of Shopping Centers, a global trade association of the shopping center industry.

Negotiations with the county still are in progress, but Wagner said construction could start as early as spring 2008 and stores could open by August 2009. Dolphin Ventures has not ruled out asking the county for tax incentives, she said.

She did not say which tenants would be at the outlet mall, but pointed at stores from the Destin, Fla., outlet center as an example. Its lineup includes Ann Taylor, Banana Republic, Calvin Klein, LIDS, Bass and Aeropostale.

"Based on our feasibility studies we found out we could get as many as 5 million shoppers to visit the outlets annually," Wagner said. "I have been in the industry for 19 years and we always look for markets that are under-served with outlet centers, and this area was under-served."

Wagner said the company looked at the number of tourists who visit the area annually and its proximity to South Padre Island, Houston and Laredo -- popular destinations for those traveling on Highway 77 -- and decided the location was right for their project.

"We can feel we can do 70 to 80 stores off the bat while in some places we start with fewer stores and see what happens," Wagner said. "But based on the information we've received from our feasibility studies and the positive reception from future tenants, we are confident this is a good project."

On Aug. 29, the Nueces County Commissioners Court conditionally approved Dolphin Ventures' bid to buy the 45 acres. In a July 25 meeting, the commissioners authorized seeking proposals from private developers to develop the 45 acres. Only Dolphin Ventures submitted a proposal.

The commissioners unanimously approved authorizing negotiations on the land deal with several conditions after discussing the bid in executive session.

County Judge Loyd Neal was not available for comment Wednesday evening after the Commissioners Court meeting.

County Commissioner Oscar Ortiz, whose district includes the outlet site, said he has high hopes for the fairgrounds area to be fully developed within the next few years.

He is not concerned about any competition with the proposed Crosstown Commons because the two projects are different.

"It is a project that will help the entire area and attract traffic from those people traveling from Highway 77," Ortiz said. "We are still in negotiations and hope it really happens."

Carduner has represented chains such as Blockbuster Video, IHOP, Home Depot and Red Robin Gourmet Burgers. He also has ownership stake in the West Oak Office and Retail Park, a 60,000-square-foot office/retail development in San Antonio.

Wagner is owner of Quier Target Marketing, and has overseen marketing programs for more than 40 outlet centers nationwide.

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