

Big plans in works for site of Spectrum

Comcast-Spectacor is talking with a Baltimore firm about restaurants, theaters, retail, maybe a hotel, in S. Phila.

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Comcast-Spectacor's plan for 300,000 square feet of new restaurants, bars, stores and movie theaters, and the possible replacement of its Wachovia Spectrum by a hotel and parking garage, underscores South Philadelphia's status as a hot spot for developers despite the slump in the national economy.

"We've had the rights to do this for more than 10 years," said Comcast-Spectacor president Peter Luukko. The city, which owns the site, gave the company development rights when it built the nearby Comcast Center, which opened in 1996.

Comcast-Spectacor turned down proposals for the site until a 2006 meeting with Cordish Co. of Baltimore, which has been developing sports-related properties in St. Louis and other cities. Luukko said Cordish has experience not just building, but also managing businesses that can cope with two different markets: the crush of stadium events, and everyday neighborhood trade, which Luukko said has increased in South Philadelphia with home construction and the reopening of the old Philadelphia Navy Yard as a corporate center.

Cordish's role, and the possible leveling of the Spectrum, were first reported in the Delaware County Daily Times.

Comcast-Spectacor presented preliminary plans at a November meeting with City Council President Anna Verna, whose district includes the stadium complex, which is owned by the city and leased to the company.

On Dec. 6, at Verna's urging, Comcast-Spectacor met with real estate agent Barbara Capozzi, who heads the Packer Park Civic Association; Shawn Jalouski, who heads the Sports Complex Special Services District, a street cleaning and neighborhood relations group funded by \$1 million in yearly contributions from Comcast-Spectacor and other stadium owners; and other key neighbors.

"There's a lot of development in the area, with John Westrum building homes at the Navy Hospital, and the Navy Yard taking on a new life," said Verna spokesman Tony Radwanski. "It's a happening place."

Neighborhood groups have been open-minded and generally positive about the plan, so far, according to State Rep. Robert Donatucci (D., Phila.), who represents the neighborhood just west of the Spectrum.

"Any plan that takes the Spectrum down, what's not to like?" said Capozzi.

"The big concern down here is traffic and parking issues," said Jalouski. "How does it affect quality of life?"

The 41-year-old Spectrum, which once hosted the National Basketball Association's 76ers and the National Hockey League's Flyers, is now home to the minor-league Phantoms hockey team and the Kixx indoor-soccer team. Luukko said there's been no planning for where the teams would go if they're evicted.

Wachovia Corp. spokeswoman Barbara Nate declined comment on what might happen to the arrangement by which Wachovia's name appears on the Spectrum if the building is demolished.

Starting in the 1980s, Cordish has redeveloped parts of Baltimore's Inner Harbor, Johns Hopkins and Camden Yards neighborhoods, and built other projects in Maryland's Washington suburbs and shore towns.

In recent years, Cordish has gone national, with projects such as the \$100 million-plus Walk retail development in Atlantic City. It's also specialized in developments adjoining pro sports arenas, such as St. Louis' Ballpark Village, a \$650 million mixed retail and residential plan that calls for adding 750,000 square feet of offices and shops and 1,200 residential units to the downtown neighborhood next to the two-year-old Busch Stadium. Similar-size Cordish projects are under way in Houston, Toronto and Kansas City.

The Cordish plan would need city approval. There's been no request, so far, for public subsidies, according to city and Comcast-Spectacor officials.

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