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Nothing definite, but they're working on it

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THINK Inner Harbor. Think Atlantic City.

Think Hard Rock, and gambling.

All you can do is think, though, because nothing is definite, yet.

The Philly Live! entertainment complex, to be located on the parking lot between the two Sports Complex arenas in South Philadelphia, is in such an embryonic stage that nothing is definite: not the price tag, not the plans, not the construction time, not the fate of the 42-year-old Wachovia Spectrum, which might be demolished sooner or later to accommodate a hotel/condominium structure.

It will be funded totally privately, essentially a 50-50 partnership between Comcast-Spectacor, which owns the Spectrum and Wachovia Center, and a developer called The Cordish Company, said David S. Cordish, president of the Baltimore-based development company.

Cordish indicated that a budget for the project could be determined within 3 months and a date for groundbreaking could be decided within 1 year, though Comcast-Spectacor chairman Ed Snider said he hoped the partnership could have more definite plans finalized before the end of February.

Cordish's current financial estimate for the project: "a lot."

The Cordish Company developed and has an equity interest in Power Plant Live! in Baltimore, a \$35 million gem of the Inner Harbor. It also developed The Walk shops in Atlantic City, a \$110 million project, as well as that city's outlet-store complex.

And, of course, it developed the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino properties in Tampa and Hollywood, Fla. Cordish said the Hollywood hotel site and its adjacent "Paradise" shops and clubs stand as the best example of what Philly Live! can become - (see www.cordish.com).

Snider also is part of the local investment group that partnered with Foxwoods Development Co. in 2006 in its successful application to build and operate a casino in South Philadelphia.

The approved site of the Foxwoods-developed casino, on the recently developed Columbus Boulevard riverfront area that is home to Ikea and Home Depot, is being protested by a citizens group and City Councilman Frank DiCicco, whose district includes the current site.

Currently, Foxwoods' efforts to go forward with its site on Columbus Boulevard have been stymied by zoning issues.

No resolution is in sight.

Notably, plans for the Columbus Boulevard casino site, not far from the Sports Complex, include an entertainment and shopping complex similar to that unveiled by Cordish and Comcast-Spectacor.

Meanwhile, City Council President Anna Verna, whose district includes the Sports Complex Cordish would develop for the hotel and entertainment area, is ecstatic about Philly Live! - and, especially, about the prospect of a posh, new hotel.

"I think we need something like this. I think it's a fabulous, fabulous idea," Verna said.

She salivated over the prospect of new jobs being created, especially if the hotel is built. She said that, based on briefings between the developer and the Eagles and Phillies, that those teams also preferred the Spectrum to be demolished and a hotel erected.

In his stint as mayor and during his current run as governor, Ed Rendell championed new Sixers, Flyers, Eagles and Phillies arena and stadium projects and reveled in their completion. Upon recently learning from Snider of the imminent further development of the Sports Complex area, Rendell said, "That is the way it was always envisioned," according to Snider.

News of the project recently leaked so the development partners decided to hold a news conference at which pictures were shown of what the 300,000-foot plaza might look like and might contain. It will house a health club, a movie theater, retail shops, bars, clubs and restaurants. Officials presented the sketchy plans to the public yesterday at the Wachovia Center.

"Rather than springing it on everybody, like we had something to hide," said Comcast-Spectacor president Peter Luukko.

Hardly. Snider said he envisioned just such an entertainment sprawl to connect the Spectrum and Wachovia Center when the new arena was being planned more than a decade ago.

"I wanted South Philadelphia to become a true entertainment district," Snider said. "We were never able to get it off the ground."

Cordish yesterday called the Sports Complex the best opportunity he has ever seen for this sort of development, sentiments his company expressed in meetings with the Sports Complex Special Services District, which represents area residents.

In general, the residents have been agreeable, but wary.

"We share an interest in making this area more attractive and more exciting for people who come," said Mike Stiles, the Phillies senior vice president of operations, who attended the news conference. "We have an interest in knowing whether there will be a hotel or not. And what temporary impact that might have on us."

Eagles president Joe Banner did not return a message left last night.

Luukko gave the distinct impression that building the hotel might be Phase 2 of the development. Among the concerns: relocating the 125 events that occur annually in the Spectrum; moving the Flyers' AHL affiliate Phantoms, who have been a huge success since they began playing in the Spectrum in 1996; and whether the hotel/condo unit, built during a real-estate downturn that is killing condo development, would make enough money to cover demolition and construction costs of a building that continues to produce revenue.

"We all love the Spectrum, but it's 40 years old," Luukko said. "In Boston, they tore down the Boston Garden. In Chicago, they tore down Chicago Stadium . . . We have to weigh what's best for the future."

Despite the current vagueness of the plans for the complex, there appears to be remarkably little reluctance from any of the parties involved. In fact, Verna led a stalwart resistance to new Eagles and Phillies stadiums.

This new construction seems to be less of a worry for the stylish politician. She asked:

"Do you think they'll have a Nordstrom's there?"

Maybe that, and a lot more. *