



Stars align for museum

Opinion

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Wednesday, 23 September 2009 00:00



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The innovative urban village proposed for southern Overland Park – with the only site of the prestigious American Museum of Natural History outside New York as its centerpiece – sounds too good to be true.

An extension of one of America's cultural icons and a top national tourist attraction right here in Johnson County?

Yes, it is on its way – on the south side of 135th Street between Nall and Lamar avenues.

At the moment, the Overland Park City Council and developer Fred Merrill await a decision by Kansas Secretary of Commerce David Kerr on whether the state will issue STAR bonds to help finance the enterprise.

“We're going to do it,” said Merrill in response to a question of whether the undertaking was totally dependent on the STAR bonds.

Merrill, president of Merrill Cos., developer of the \$575 million Prairiefire at LionsGate, asserted in an interview that he is determined the project go forward with or without the bonds, although he said it would take longer without them.

The Overland Park City Council has approved a funding plan that includes \$84 million in STAR bonds, \$15.4 million from a transportation development district 1 percent sales tax and \$475 million in private debt and equity.

Naturally the world-famous museum, or AMNH, in New York will not be replicated here. But the 30,000-square-foot local structure will feature two of the museum's traveling exhibits a year, spring and fall, as well as permanent displays.

How did Merrill, who has spent much of his career developing shopping centers, office buildings and other projects in Dallas and Phoenix, get connected with the museum in New York?

Originally, he said, his group envisioned a development called “Celebration of Kansas” that would dramatize its history and physical landscape, at the 135th Street location. An architect in the project mentioned he knew someone at the AMNH, raising the possibility of linking the museum with the site here.

Contacts were made and after a year or so of discussions, Merrill said museum officials concluded the Overland Park venture met their expansion needs.

As planned, Prairiefire will include a mix of ground level upscale retail establishments with residences and offices on the floors above, a boutique hotel said to be like no other in the area, and additional housing, both rental and for sale.

And green space. This would include a six-acre native wetlands interpretative walk, a one-acre “central park” for concerts and public events, a biking/hiking trail and a butterfly garden.

Merrill said a professor at Kansas State University is designing the wetlands and that the University of Kansas’ Natural History Museum and Biodiversity Research Center, along with the Spencer Museum of Art, would participate in works combining nature and art.

Bruce Hartman, executive director of the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art at Johnson County Community College, will be the consultant on art and sculpture for the project, Merrill said. He said he is working with school districts here to develop educational programs linked to exhibits at the museum.

Synergy abounds among the new venture and existing attractions, both in the 135th Street corridor and the metroplex. Among them are the Nicklaus Golf Club at LionsGate, which is adjacent to Prairiefire, Deanna Rose Children’s Farmstead and the newly opened Overland Park Soccer Complex.

If all goes well, the museum and some attractions would open in 2011.

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