

■ **New Life for Former Ak-Sar-Ben Sites**

Five developers have teamed up to raise an urban village in the heart of Omaha, providing a blend of apartments, town houses, office buildings, stores, restaurants, movie theaters and a hotel.

The board of the nonprofit Ak-Sar-Ben Future Trust, which took control of the land surrounding the closed racetrack in 1996, agreed Friday to specific plans to remake the property.

The plans nearly went another direction that planners and developers say would have added little to the city's texture.

"This is something that there is no precedent for in Omaha," said Ken Stinson, chairman of the future trust. "It's the kind of development that will enhance the attractiveness of Omaha.

"We wanted the best and highest use," Stinson said. "We could have put big-box stores on it."

That would have been profitable for the trust but not what anyone involved wanted to see.

Omaha Planning Director Steve Jensen said he is certain that the Wal-Marts, Targets, Home Depots and Lowe's would have loved to be part of a mega-store super center, Jensen said.

"It's a testimony to the Ak-Sar-Ben Future Trust that they didn't just get this ground and sell it," Jensen said. "This will benefit the city for many years."

The commercial use of the land might have gone a different way in 2002 were it not for the presence of Doug Bisson, a community planner with HDR, as the neighborhood representative on the trust's board.

By 2002, the trust was essentially out of money. The track was long closed, and the Coliseum was preparing to shut down.

Stinson said it was Bisson who first raised the option of bringing a mix of housing, offices, restaurants and retail to the area.

Omaha had the chance to be at the forefront of the emerging "new urbanism" trend of creating great new neighborhoods inside cities, Bisson said. "This is college town meets research town meets neighborhoods."

"We were trying to do things that we couldn't find in a cookbook," Stinson said.

Noddle Development of Omaha signed on in May 2005 to put a package together after examining similar developments in other cities, including near Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology outside Boston.

Noddle picked Urban Design Associates of Pittsburgh to come up with a master plan and strict building requirements that far exceeded the Omaha By Design guidelines for materials, streetscapes and parking.

A signature park will be placed on what is viewed as the most valuable piece of ground, at 67th Street and West Center Road. A 90-foot tower or obelisk, visible from Interstate 80, will be a centerpiece of the village.

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To make it economically viable, the City Council this week approved more than \$20 million in tax increment financing, or TIF, to pay for the new streets, sewers, park and site preparation. TIF is a way to subsidize a project by letting the new property tax revenue it generates pay for part of the development.

The total project is expected to cost \$166 million.

Developers, architects and planners all used the word "unique" when describing the opportunity to create a new neighborhood on 70 acres in the middle of a city.

The process was different from what most of the developers were used to, said Jay Noddle of Noddle Development. No one could just take a successful plan from a previous project and plunk it down for Aksarben Village, he said.

For example, all of the multilevel parking garages are required to be hidden, usually in the center of a square block surrounded by an office building, apartments and other buildings.

Another unusual aspect is the use of five different developers, each with its own specialty.

- Noddle Development is in the lead role but limits itself to the retail and office buildings in the center of the village.
- Magnum Development is responsible for the entertainment area and has lined up tenants for the movie theater and fitness center.
- RHW Development of Overland Park, Kan., won the hotel contract for a Courtyard by Marriott at the intersection of 67th and Pine Streets.
- Broadmoor Development, which developed the One Pacific Place apartments, is responsible for about two-thirds of the apartments and town houses between 63rd and 64th Streets.
- Hancock/Alchemy will develop a style of housing where people can live upstairs from their store or office.

In the end, members of the trust and Noddle concluded that they had to pay attention to more than just the 70 acres of Ak-Sar-Ben land north of West Center Road.

"The buildings south of Center were a barrier to success," said Dana Bradford of McCarthy Group, which represented the trust.

Magnum was encouraged to expand and upgrade its planned retail development on the southwest corner of 63rd and Center Streets. The University of Nebraska Foundation was encouraged to purchase 17 acres south of Center for future expansion of the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

When completed, the village will be part of a nearly 170-acre transformation of the Ak-Sar-Ben area, which stretches along the Little Papio Creek from Pacific Street on the north to Spring Street on the south. The effort, which began in 1996, has involved both private companies and UNO.

By C. David Kotok
World-Herald Staff Writer

■ Tenants Eager for Aksarben Village

For Businesses and Organizations Planning a Move to Aksarben Village, The Choice was a Lot About the Neighbors They'll Have

The redevelopment of so much ground in a midtown location offers a chance for new and larger spaces in the midst of an already established, dense population.

Mostly, however, the businesses - including a movie theater and a grocer - like who their neighbors will be in the complex of shops, restaurants, offices, apartments, town houses, hotel, fitness center and park near single-family neighborhoods and college campuses.

The mosaic created by eclectic pieces that will make up Aksarben Village will "completely change the way people view the dinner-and-a-movie experience," said Bill Barstow, owner of Main Street Theatres, which plans a 12-screen theater as part of the project.

A location close to the Peter Kiewit Institute is "a huge, huge benefit" for Olsson Associates, said Brad Strittmatter, vice president of the engineering firm.

"We hire a lot of students part time and would like to keep them on after they graduate," he said.

Terry Fairfield, chief executive officer of the University of Nebraska Foundation, said the Aksarben site brings the foundation's Omaha offices closer to NU's two Omaha campuses while keeping officials in the midst of the business community.

Mike Schwartz of Wohlner's Grocery said he likes the project's emphasis on pedestrians and the mix of retail and office space close to where people live.

"This will be a real community," he said.

Some of the village's prospective tenants and their plans:

The Cosmopolitan Theatre

Reinventing what customers think of as the traditional theater is the goal of Main Street Theatres for its 12-screen project in the entertainment district of Aksarben Village.

Owner Bill Barstow said the multilevel theater will be Omaha's first to use digital projection. The use of that technology, 3D presentation and multimedia will allow corporate and educational use of the facility to be part of the business plan, Barstow said. He said he also could envision the facility being used for pay-per-view concerts and catered events.

Auditoriums of up to 300 seats will feature not only high-volume commercial films, he said, but also two smaller "lounge-type" auditoriums catering to upscale adult clientele with expanded food and drink service.

Most of Omaha's new theaters have been on the fringes of the metro area, but Barstow said his Plattsmouth-based company is used to going against the norm. He has built, bought and sold a number of theaters since forming the company in 1988 after retiring from the Air Force, and he now has 37 screens at seven locations in Nebraska and Iowa.

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The theaters range from the historic Pioneer Theatre in Nebraska City to the new Promenade Cinema 14 in Sioux City, Iowa, that is part of a downtown redevelopment effort.

Barstow said his passion matched the passion of the officials at Magnum Development, and he was impressed with the Aksarben Village vision of a complete town within the city that has an upscale, cosmopolitan feel. That's where the theater's name came from.

"The name of our company is Main Street Theatres, and we want to be just that: a company that's small and local but, at the same time, knocks you over with all the gee-whiz things you can put in a theater," Barstow said.

Wohlner's Grocery

Owner Mike Schwartz takes seriously the responsibility he's inherited for the family grocery store at 52nd and Leavenworth Streets.

Schwartz commissioned a market study and rejected free rent downtown as he contemplated a move aimed at gaining space while still providing personalized service and a focus on quality meats, fine wines and specialty products.

After much study and wooing, he chose Aksarben Village.

A new Wohlner's will occupy about 14,500 square feet on the first floor of a building on the northeast corner of 67th Street and West Center Road.

Employees no longer will have to mix the sourdough bread in one area of the basement, carry it to another area for proofing and then up the stairs to be baked.

Schwartz said he was impressed by the integrity of the Noddle Companies and the fact that "the facility they're making available to me is about perfect for what I was looking for."

"I believe in what they're creating there," he said.

Schwartz operates the business opened by his grandfather, one of several brothers who ran neighborhood markets in Omaha. Schwartz started his career by carrying bags of groceries at age 7.

His grandfather, Albert Wohlner, opened his first grocery at 19th and Fort Streets in 1900. He moved to 30th and California Streets after World War I and then to Leavenworth Street in 1934.

That 72-year-old location has about 7,000 square feet of display space and a similar amount of storage and preparation space.

The new store will have a sit-down delicatessen, and Wohlner's will start making pastries from scratch. The variety of products carried, Schwartz said, will have better display and be obvious to new customers as well as long-timers who know what they're looking for.

"Basically, it's showing off everything we do now. It'll be one of a kind, and it's Omaha's own."

■ **Tenants Eager for Aksarben Village...** (continued)

Olsson Associates

The engineering and planning firm is celebrating its 50th year and a growth spurt in Omaha by planning to more than double its office space.

The Aksarben Village location "is a natural fit for us," said Brad Strittmatter, vice president.

Olsson Associates provides engineering, planning, landscape architecture, surveying, construction observation and environmental sciences services.

The employee-owned company of about 600 employees also has offices in Lincoln, where the company started; Grand Island, Hastings, Holdrege, Scottsbluff and South Sioux City, Neb.; Overland Park, Kan; Riverside and Springfield, Mo.; Phoenix and Tucson, Ariz.; Minneapolis; Denver; and Sioux City, Iowa.

Its Omaha-area projects include the Cunningham Lake restoration, the Market Pointe shopping center in Papillion, the landscaping at Village Pointe and Omaha's combined sewer project.

The company currently has 65 employees in Omaha, up from 10 or 12 just three years ago. Instead of about 7,000 square feet at 72nd Street and Mercy Road, Olsson Associates will have 18,000 square feet at Aksarben Village, with an expansion option.

Strittmatter said the company was attracted to the development by its easy access to Peter Kiewit Institute students and graduates, as well as "Noddle's willingness to be true to the concept of mixed-use development."

"The opportunity is so rare, especially in a setting we need to succeed," he said. "Really, it was the whole package."

DLR Group

The architecture-engineering-planning firm that is coordinating the various developers involved with bringing Aksarben Village to life is considering moving its own main office there.

"It's truly an exciting project and an intriguing possibility - not only the possibility of doing our own building, but also doing it in connection with an urban redevelopment," said Ken West, director of DLR's Omaha office and project leader for Aksarben Village.

West said the firm likes the idea of being close to students at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, the Peter Kiewit Institute and Scott Technology Center as well as the culture and environment that's going to be created by the project's mix of uses.

DLR, which now is in Regency, would plan about 32,000 square feet for its 110 Omaha employees, West said.

The employee-owned firm, formed in 1966 in Omaha, began its expansion when a desire to serve American Indian clients led to the purchase of a Phoenix firm, according to its Web site.

The company continued to grow through the acquisition of established firms, and today the DLR Group has offices in Des Moines; Portland, Ore.; Overland Park, Kan.; Philadelphia;

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Honolulu; Milwaukee; Chicago; Orlando, Fla.; Colorado Springs, Colo.; Sacramento, Calif.; Seattle; and Sioux Falls, S.D.

DLR was part of the Qwest Center Omaha team, and some of its current Omaha-area projects include the WallStreet Omaha and Tribedo condominium towers, north downtown's first two hotels and Gretna's newest elementary school.

The Aksarben project, West said, involves a lot of cooperation and collaboration to reach a common goal. "It's really exciting to see," he said.

University of Nebraska Foundation

The nonprofit organization that supports the university system's four campuses put together a site-selection committee more than a year ago to replace its outgrown space in Omaha.

"Aksarben is ideal for us," said Terry Fairfield, the foundation's chief executive officer. "Its proximity to both UNO and the medical center is better than now."

The foundation, now at 87th Street and West Dodge Road, will about double its Omaha office space to 17,000 square feet.

Fairfield said the foundation has 25 employees in Omaha, and a number of Lincoln employees also use Omaha office space. NU President J.B. Milliken has an office in Omaha, and the move will give the Omaha office conference space, Fairfield said.

The foundation has been actively acquiring property in the vicinity for UNO's future expansion, he said, and the business environment is attractive to foundation officials.

Fairfield also likes the idea of participating in the effort to revitalize midtown.

"I'm impressed with what Mutual of Omaha and the medical center have planned. All of these projects together - the public-private partnerships they involve - create an exciting momentum for redeveloping that area."

■ It's a College Town in the City

By the beginning of the 2008 fall semester, students from the University of Nebraska at Omaha and the College of St. Mary will be able to start the party on 67th Street.

While Aksarben Village is designed to serve the entire Omaha community, it is first and foremost a college town.

From the small apartments to the wireless Internet connection in the park, the village concept serves the academic and research community, along with the corporations that rely on attracting freshly minted graduates.

"This is one of the most exciting things I've seen at a university anywhere," said University of Nebraska President J.B. Milliken. "It's an urban village that's part of the campus."

Many of the longtime homeowners in the Ak-Sar-Ben neighborhood are taking a wait-and-see attitude on whether the \$166 million commercial and residential development helps or hurts them.

There is little argument, however, that the village will help UNO, the Kiewit Institute and the College of St. Mary attract students, faculty and researchers.

"This positions UNO to be one of the most attractive metropolitan campuses in the country," said B.J. Reed, who wears dual hats as a UNO dean and a neighborhood representative with the nonprofit Ak-Sar-Ben Future Trust.

"This is unique in my experience to have an urban village dropped between a developing campus," Reed said.

The village is bordered on three sides by higher education. To the north is UNO's south campus. The College of St. Mary sits to the west along Mercy Road and 72nd Street.

The former Chili Greens golf course, to the south and west of the village, was sold at below-market rates to the University of Nebraska Foundation as an incentive for the foundation to purchase 17 additional acres along the south side of West Center Road.

Among the possible uses for the new UNO property are athletic fields, a convocation center or new hockey arena and housing for married students.

Sister Maryanne Stevens, president of the College of St. Mary, is one of those most excited about the development.

"It will just add to the excitement of college life," Stevens said. The 1,000 St. Mary students will have many more opportunities to interact with UNO students, she said.

"You can't study without leisure, and you need beauty for leisure," Stevens said.

An eight-acre park at 67th Street and West Center Road was designed with students very much in mind. The plaza area was developed with the idea that students will be pulling out their laptop computers and using wireless connections to the Internet.

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■ **It's a College Town in the City** (continued)

"This is where technology meets the outdoors," said Shannon Gordon, the park project manager for Ochsner Hare & Hare of Kansas City, Mo.

Many of the developers also drew up their plans with the academic community in mind. Courtyard by Marriott, which is geared for business travelers, was chosen as the hotel to serve visitors to UNO, the Kiewit Institute, the University of Nebraska Medical Center and the Scott Technology Center.

One-bedroom and studio apartments will make up 70 percent of the 234 units in Broadmoor Developments' main complex west of 63rd Street and north of Center Street, said Broadmoor's Howard Kooper.

Omaha City Planning Director Steve Jensen said the village has the potential to both "be the campus town for UNO" and stimulate the surrounding residential neighborhood.

"It has to benefit the whole Ak-Sar-Ben neighborhood," Jensen said. "It adds stability and should improve property values."

But some neighbors worried that the price may be increased traffic on their residential streets.

Eileen Slane, who has lived near 56th Street and Poppleton Avenue for 30 years, remembers the horse-racing traffic through the neighborhood.

"I had young children then, and the traffic was really horrific," Slane said.

Speeding has re-emerged as a problem with UNO's expansion on the north end of the old Ak-Sar-Ben site, Slane said.

"This Aksarben Village could make the traffic even worse," she said. "I hope the city has conducted studies to determine the best way to handle the increased traffic."

Ray Nelle, a retired 30-year real estate agent near 55th and Mason Streets, expects more traffic but also an improvement in property values.

"There was a time when you couldn't find a house for sale in this neighborhood because they sold as fast as they went on the market," Nelle said.

Nelle said the new development could stimulate recent stagnation in the neighborhood's property values.

Traffic is always a concern when this kind of growth occurs in a neighborhood, said Tim Potter, president of the Aksarben/Elmwood Park Neighborhood Association, stretching from 50th to 72nd and Leavenworth to Center Streets.

"Congestion should be confined to Pacific and Center Streets," he said. "Pacific already is congested between 60th and 72nd Streets." As long as people don't use Shirley and Pine Streets as shortcut entrances, he said, the village should be a plus.

World-Herald staff writer Chris Olson contributed to this report

By C. David Kotok
World-Herald Staff Writer

■ **EDITORIAL: Projects Including Aksarben Village are Pointing to a Bright Future for the City**

Omaha is moving in the right direction in several important ways. Encouraging trends are under way involving the promotion of economic diversification, attractive urban spaces and amenities, university research and long-range civic planning.

Given this fortunate confluence of developments, let's consider a possible - even likely - scenario about the Omaha of, say, 2016:

The Courtyard by Marriott at Aksarben Village has been especially busy with impressive visitors from out of town:

A telecommunications executive from California scheduled to meet with faculty and students at the nearby Kiewit Institute about a project his company will fund there. A biotech expert who flew in from the East Coast to talk to officials at the University of Nebraska Medical Center about joint work on a research project. An engineering executive from Chicago in town to meet with officials about an intriguing project at the Scott Technology Center that has caught his company's attention. Parents from St. Louis accompanying their son, who is considering graduate work at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

These and other out-of-town visitors are struck by the appealing atmosphere at Aksarben Village - the creative blend of retail shops, offices and residential space, all tied together aesthetically. Visitors who meet with Omahans in the area near UNMC and the Mutual of Omaha headquarters get a similar impression of the attractive mix of retail and commercial amenities, many of which got their start about a decade earlier as part of a strategic plan for midtown revitalization.

"I never realized," one visitor says, "how much Omaha has on the ball. This isn't some sleepy, backward-looking town, after all."

Such are some of the possibilities that can come into reach for Omaha as a result of impressive urban planning. As articles by World-Herald staff writer C. David Kotok have recently shown, the Aksarben Village project offers tremendous opportunities. A salute is well deserved for the creative vision of all the parties, perhaps above all the developers who smartly adopted a nimble, collaborative game plan that went far beyond the standard approach.

As the Kotok articles explained, the Aksarben Village project is a plus along many dimensions - a boost in terms of urban attractiveness (what a combination to have an innovative movie theater concept along with a spanking-new deli from Wohlner's Grocery) and in terms of academics and research (with long-term opportunities for UNO, the Kiewit Institute, the Scott Technology Center and the College of St. Mary).

The plans for retail, commercial and residential revitalization near UNMC and Mutual of Omaha no doubt will offer similar benefits.

One of the finest biographies of an Omahan ever written was Harl Dalstrom's work "A.V. Sorensen and the New Omaha." In it, Dalstrom ably described the multiple steps forward taken by Omaha in the mid-20th century under the leadership of then-Mayor Sorensen and other leaders.

As the plans move forward for Aksarben Village and other visionary revitalization projects, this community can take pride that a new Omaha is taking shape, well positioned to stand proud in the 21st century.

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