

Recreation, entertainment complex coming to Daleville?

Developers are looking at Delaware County for a complex of hotels, stores, restaurants, skating and a water park.

By Keith Roysdon

October 18, 2007, MUNCIE -- Developers from New York are considering hundreds of acres in the Daleville area for a potential entertainment and recreation complex that would bring hotels, stores, restaurants, an indoor water park, a skating rink -- and as many as 1,800 jobs.

Peoples Management Resource representatives have been talking to local chamber of commerce officials -- as well as Ball State University, Cardinal Health System and local banks, real estate agents and other businesses -- about the possibility of developing land near Interstate 69 in southwestern Delaware County.

Developers and business consultants Andrew Gottlieb and Joe Szigethy are negotiating an option to purchase up to 800 acres of property near Interstate 69 and Ind. 67. Gottlieb and Szigethy helped Fort Wayne officials land a guitar assembly shop and retail sales center.

"We haven't made enough definitive decisions," Szigethy said Wednesday when asked about the Daleville-area project. "We think we've selected a site, but we're not sure until we can get feedback on the property from the owners." His partner, Gottlieb, did not return a call seeking comment on Wednesday. Economic development officials this week said it was too early to talk about the potential development. "I have no comment," Dan Allen, president of the Muncie-Delaware County Chamber of Commerce, said Wednesday.

A waterpark industry expert told The Star Press that while the size of the potential development was "pretty ambitious," the family entertainment industry is seeing more of a "mix" of uses like that proposed for Daleville.

"Almost every hotel waterpark project we get calls about now involves a mixed-use project, with shopping, entertainment, residential areas," said **Jeff Coy, president of JLC Hospitality Consulting, an Arizona-based firm.** "Developers have discovered that clustering all of these things together increases cross-utilization and spikes attendance."

The Real Deal

Although local chamber officials were mum about the project, Gottlieb and Szigethy are familiar names to Indiana economic development officials and their desire to mount such a project was known.

Ron Sheets, project manager for the Fort Wayne-Allen County Economic Development Alliance, worked with the two as they found a site for a Babicz Guitars assembly facility and showroom in Fort Wayne.

"I'm aware of the fact they were interested in speaking with somebody concerning the establishment of more than a water park, somewhere between Indianapolis and Fort Wayne," Sheets said. "We just didn't pursue it. It's not that we're not interested. Nobody slams the door on anything good. It's just not our emphasis based on the type of employers we try to keep here." Sheets added, concerning Gottlieb and Szigethy, "Those guys are the real deal, as far as we're concerned. They're the real deal."

Michael Hicks, director of the Bureau of Business Research at Ball State University, said he imagined that Gottlieb and Szigethy had done demographic research and found that a multi-use recreation area would be "viable."

"A place an hour north of Indianapolis [like Delaware County] draws from at least three significant population centers, Indianapolis and Fort Wayne and Chicago," Hicks said.

Coy noted that an indoor water park recently opened in Shipshewana in northern Indiana. That follows by several months the Caribbean Cove hotel and waterpark on the north side of Indianapolis and the Great Wolf Lodge near King's Island amusement park in Ohio.

"Everybody is doing something," **Coy** said. "Even Microtels are putting in a little plastic slide and calling it a water park."

Economic Impact

Asked if large recreation and entertainment complexes were susceptible to economic downturns, **Coy** said, "These hotel water park resorts, you can go to the Wisconsin Dells or Great Wolf Lodge two or three times a year for an extended weekend for the same price it would cost to fly to Orlando. In a poor economy, people start to trade down a little bit. They're still going to take a vacation. They may cut back on gasoline and food, but they're still going to have their getaway."

Hicks said he didn't believe such developments could be compared unfavorably to other vacation choices -- or denigrated as sources of jobs.

"I wouldn't even be as dismal as to suggest it would be an alternative in a poor economy to Orlando," Hicks said. "I view these types of economic activities more favorably than some might.

"There's a tendency to romance the smokestack, but the dollar produced in health care, education or a splash park has the same dollar value as the dollar produced in manufacturing a car."

The impact of 1,800 jobs on the area would be substantial. According to state workforce development figures, Delaware County had 3,063 unemployed residents in August, when the local unemployment rate rose to 5.7 percent.

Email Keith Roysdon at kroysdon@muncie.gannett.com.

Jeff Coy is president of JLC Hospitality Consulting, a research & economic consulting firm based in Phoenix-Cave Creek AZ. For more information regarding project feasibility, contact him at 480-488-3382 or email jeffcoy@jeffcoy.com. Website is www.jeffcoy.com.