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Link to the future: Golf course property could shape city's downtown landscape

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With striking views of the Rockies, acre after acre of lush Kentucky bluegrass and the Poudre River meandering alongside, the 100 acres at the corner of East Lincoln and South Lemay avenues is one of the last and largest undeveloped tracts in the heart of downtown Fort Collins.

Just a mile from Old Town, it encompasses the Link-N-Greens golf course and the Coy Hoffman barn, an integral piece of Fort Collins' past.

Allen Ginsborg, managing director of NewMark Merrill Mountain States in Fort Collins, wants to ensure it plays an integral role in the city's future as well.

Ginsborg has an option to buy the 100 acres from longtime owners Dorothy Whisler, James P. and Ruth N. Hoffman Trusts and a group of investors who own and manage the golf course.

He said he has no specific development plans but envisions a "legacy project" that benefits the city and Old Town for years to come. "I just began a process that will take a few years ... I really want to do something special with this property," he said.

The property, home to Link-N-Greens since 1986, is not without its development challenges.

Much of the land is located within the city's 100-year or 500-year floodplain that restricts what kind and how much construction is allowed.

No homes or hotels would be permitted on about one-third of the land within the 100-year floodplain, but limited residential and commercial building would be allowed within the 500-year-floodplain, said Marsha Hilmes-Robinson, floodplain administrator with the city's stormwater utility department.

Proposed changes to the state floodplain could tighten development restrictions including increasing the area of the floodway, prohibiting new structures at all within the 100-year floodplain, or leaving everything the same, Hilmes-Robinson said.

Proposals "keep changing daily," she said. "Until they get adopted, none of us will for sure know."

The land is zoned Community Commercial Poudre River area, which supports moderate development that is "compatible with the scenic, natural and historic nature of downtown, allows moderate commercial and limited residential development," according to zoning regulations.

Ginsborg has several years to come up with a viable project for the property, and he's taking his time, he said, reaching out to interested parties to explore different ideas.

"There are neat things we could do to improve the river and community aspects of the property that would enhance the wildlife and riparian qualities" and create an environment that is uniquely Fort Collins, Ginsborg said.

He is not the first to envision grand plans for the property.

In 1998, Fort Collins developer Bill Neal had an option to buy the land and planned to create a "riverside treasure," including a hotel-convention center, 12-story high rise condos and a retail-entertainment plaza, according to Coloradoan reports.

Neal abandoned his vision as he worried about floodplain rules being adopted by the City Council.

Neal died in a July 2004 plane crash in Fort Collins.

Since then, plans have come and gone, including a big box development that went nowhere, according to Joe Frank, the city's advanced planning director.

"They were looking at Walmart across the street and wanted to do that type of development. That was going to be a problem," Frank said.

Coming and going

The vast, undeveloped property is often spoken of in the same breath as the 12.4-acre Oxbow site on Linden Street and the Poudre River District as linchpins to achieving the city's vision for Old Town.

"Any (undeveloped) property like this, whether small or large ... represents an opportunity for us to achieve the vision we have for downtown," said Josh Birks, the city's economic adviser.

Achieving that vision goes beyond any one parcel, Birks said, "but an opportunity like Link-N-Greens needs to be treated with care so it can help achieve the overall vision."

Ultimately, he said, the goal is to have something that complements Old Town rather than competes directly, he said.

Rich Shannon, a Realtor with Timberline Partners, representing the owners, said the property was never intended as a golf course long term.

"It was a nice element for the community for a long time, but it was clear that it was a holding pattern until the right development opportunity came along," he said.

Charlie Musgrave, president of Link-N-Greens Inc., which owns the course, driving range, pro shop and snack bar, added that he and other investors "just had a vision that some day (the land) would be worth a higher use than a golf course."

Musgrave declined to say what kind of development might be right for the property.

Neighbor Tom Peters, who plans to open his new Fort Collins Brewery across Lincoln Avenue at the end of the month, said he'd just as soon see the land remain a nice, green golf course. A good way to finish a day on the golf course, he said, is over a beer at, perhaps, his brewery across the street.

Barring that, however, he said he'd like to see more local businesses on the land to extend Old Town farther east to create a walking mall type of development. What he doesn't want: Another brewery.

Ginsborg, who has spent his career buying and reinvigorating shopping centers, including the Albertsons-anchored center at Horsetooth and College, said retail would be a small part of any potential project.

Neighborhood activist Betty Aragon said rumors have been circulating about the property's future, including development as a festival grounds and a strip mall with big-box anchor.

"There are a lot of rumors but certainly with the golf course going away, that is a big chunk of land,"

she said. "Because of its close proximity to the neighborhood, we would like the opportunity to be able to meet with the developer and at least have some input into what is going to go in there.

"Because it is such a big piece of property, I hope they are sensitive to the fact that the land is close to the neighborhood and having a meeting with us to hear our ideas ... is great."

No meeting has been scheduled yet, but Ginsborg said he will begin meeting with different groups in the fall. "This summer, I'm just trying to understand the physical features of the real estate, the riparian corridors and spend time with a wildlife consultant because I want it to be a thoughtful approach, not just throw something out and hope it sticks."

As far as the Oxbow property goes, owner Pat Stryker of the Bohemian Foundation canceled plans to put a performance venue on the 12 acres.

In a February 2009 statement, Stryker said: "We intend to retain the Oxbow land and still hope to develop a music project on the site in the future — it's a question of timing. We remain optimistic about the future of Fort Collins, and highly committed to doing our part to help our community fulfill its potential."

Foundation officials were unavailable for comment on plans for Oxbow.

Piquing interest

Ginsborg's interest in the property has piqued the attention of river advocates.

Gary Wockner of Save the Poudre wrote to Shannon recently to express the group's concerns about developing within the city's floodplain and about the existing stress on the river, including proposals to use some of its water for new or expanded reservoirs.

Wockner said the manipulation of, degradation to and development in floodplains can cause negative effects on streamflows, wetlands, fish and aquatic species.

He maintains that only about 40 of the 100 acres are outside the floodway or floodplain and suitable for development.

"Development within the floodplain is a serious concern of Save the Poudre," Wockner said.

"The floodplains protect the river and ecological corridor through Fort Collins, and we would like to see the 100-year floodplain protected."

A 100-year flood is defined as an event that has a 1 percent chance of occurring in a given year.

"As the corridor faces increasing development pressure, we're going to have a strong interest in keeping the ecology of the corridor healthy and functioning," Wockner said.

Save the Poudre would support an environmentally sensitive mixed-use commercial and residential project built outside the 100-year floodplain.

Wockner said he has raised the idea with several city officials of putting a small gravel pit reservoir on the property to help meet the city's water storage needs and provide a recreational facility for residents.

"It could be a small, beautiful lake in the middle of town," Wockner said.

The city has not responded to the idea, he said.

Ginsborg, an avid fly-fisherman, said he moved his family to Fort Collins more than a decade ago "after enjoying a picture-perfect hike in Poudre Canyon," and fully intends to embrace the river.

"I hold the Poudre River in high regard and respect its unique natural heritage and significant cultural history," Ginsborg wrote in a letter to Wockner.

"The opportunity we have ahead of us is to create the best possible concept for the property; a concept that protects and enhances the river corridor as a resource for nature in harmony with other uses, which are sustainable and represent the needs of our community in a uniquely Fort Collins way."

DDA's involvement

Link-N-Greens sits just outside the Downtown Development Authority boundaries, and Ginsborg said he was unsure if the DDA would play a role in the development.

"I've been told they have had an interest in this property," he said. "But we are trying to figure everything out."

DDA Executive Director Matt Robenalt was unavailable for comment.

Project manager Anne Aspen said the DDA board at its October retreat considered the property appropriate for inclusion in the DDA boundaries.

Inclusion, however, requires property owners to submit a petition to the board, as Fort Collins Brewing and Odell Brewing Co. did last year.

Changing DDA boundaries also requires approval by the DDA board and City Council.

"It is a big enough property that has a lot of redevelopment potential and they would probably want us at the table," Aspen said of the developers.

"It certainly is a huge opportunity for downtown in general. It is a very large piece of property with the potential for quite a bit of development there that will have an impact on downtown, for sure."
