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Officials remain positive about project

The 34-acre interchange property on U.S. 460 remains vacant, but work continues on its development.

By Chris Winston | The Roanoke Times

BLACKSBURG -- For nearly six years, town officials and those at the Blacksburg Partnership have worked on one development.

The 34-acre property on South Main Street looks much the same as it did a decade ago when the U.S. 460 interchange opened. It's empty.

But that hasn't dampened the efforts of Diane Akers, who is president of the partnership that was tasked with marketing the property. Akers said she hopes this is the year the project moves forward.

"If it's the right type of development, if it takes long to do that, it's worth the wait," she said.

"These things take time, and we're confident that because of our due diligence we'll have a quality project that the community can rally behind and be proud of."

The Blacksburg Partnership and Draper Aden Associates completed a master plan for the property last fall that includes 6 to 8 acres of business development and the remaining 25 or more acres as recreational space.

According to the plan, four office buildings would be constructed near South Main Street's intersection with Hightop Road.

The recreation space would hold two baseball fields, a soccer field, three tennis courts and amenities such as playgrounds and shelters.

In the coming weeks, the Blacksburg Town Council will be asked to finalize a request-for-proposal for the project that will call for a developer to come on board.

Akers said she expects the RFP process to take about six months and for forward progress to be made this year.

The master plan has one large office building with 20,000 square feet of space and three, 5,000-square-foot buildings -- for a total of 35,000 square feet.

As the "gateway to Blacksburg," Akers said the proximity of the Montgomery Regional Hospital and Virginia Tech's Corporate Research Center should create a demand for office space.

Selling or leasing the front parcels is critical to pay for the remainder of the project.

Just the site preparation will cost nearly \$3 million, according to Aden's estimates, with nearly \$1.7 million of that needed to prepare the recreational areas. And that's just the first step.

Dean Crane, director of Blacksburg parks and recreation department, said the field space is needed. He said there are too many teams trying to access a small number of fields between 3 and 6 p.m.

He said additional fields, which could be built one at a time, would allow other fields to recuperate from overuse and give a much-needed recreation area to residents of Blacksburg's south side.

Crane said he remains optimistic about the project -- but admits it could take years more.

"In government, things take time," he said. "You never know."

A developer has been sought for the property previously. In 2006, after several months of recruiting, Atlanta-based hotelier Earl Patton and his New South Partners company notified the Blacksburg Partnership and town officials that their plan to build a hotel, restaurant, retail shops and a town park on the Interchange Park property had fallen through.

Without a quick exit off the 460 bypass into the development, officials now think a commercial development is not the best use for the site.

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