
Ballpark builders turn to Arizona

JMI Sports has role in stadium proposal

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The construction of Petco Park helped spark a surge of condo and office development in downtown's East Village, transforming it from rundown warehouse district to a trendy urban neighborhood.

Now people involved with the Petco project are trying to use a baseball stadium as a development catalyst once again – this time a spring training facility in the Arizona desert.

JMI Sports of San Diego is part of a team working to build a stadium and training center for the Cleveland Indians in Goodyear, Ariz., a fast-growing suburb west of Phoenix.

Today, the Arizona Sports and Tourism Authority is expected to authorize a funding package that would allow the \$56 million deal to move forward. The spring training stadium would serve as the centerpiece of an urban village of offices, condominiums and retail shops.

“If you go there now, it's farmland,” said Erik Judson of JMI Sports. “But in the very near future, there's going to be a significant mixed-use development around a ballpark.”

Can a spring training stadium, which would host fewer than 20 games over six weeks, create enough of a draw to ignite surrounding development?

Developers think so, likening it to having a traditional park, civic plaza or shopping village that serves as an amenity to a surrounding development.

Moreover, they think the stadium will be used for far more than spring training games. The facility could potentially have concerts, college baseball games, fantasy baseball camps and farmers markets.

“We thought if we could take some of (the) experience that the Padres had and JMI Sports had in San Diego and apply it to Goodyear, we could introduce into the marketplace the concept of a ballpark village around a spring training facility,” said John Ruggieri, managing director of Rose Properties Southwest, the primary developer of the project.

Ruggieri said he thinks this is the first spring training stadium to be the centerpiece of a mixed-use development. But he doesn't view the project as risky, partly because the city of Goodyear plans to move its City Hall, library and other facilities nearby, and partly because the western edge of metropolitan Phoenix is growing fast.

Judson, the former vice president of ballpark development for the Padres, essentially nurtured the hotly controversial \$450 million Petco Park project through a contentious, six-year development process.

About a year ago, Judson teamed up with Padres owner John Moores to form JMI Sports with the idea of taking the

expertise they had acquired building Petco Park and applying it to other cities. The Goodyear deal is the first major project in which the company has been involved.

Ruggieri formerly was employed at San Diego-based Product Design Consultants, a professional design and engineering firm that worked on Petco Park.

JMI Sports and Rose Properties are expected to sign a joint venture agreement with the city of Goodyear to build the 10,000-seat stadium and nearby practice facilities for the Indians, who would be moving their spring training site to Arizona from Florida, where the team has trained since 1993.

Wood Family Enterprises, owner of the 75 acres that would make up the stadium, training fields and surrounding development, also is party to the agreement.

The first hurdle the group cleared was luring the Indians. Judson's and JMI Sports' contacts in major league baseball were instrumental in getting the Indians to commit to moving, according to Brian Dalke, deputy city manager for Goodyear. The stadium is expected to open in 2009.

The Indians plan on making the facility "their home away from home," using it for training and rehabilitation of players well beyond the spring training season, Ruggieri said.

Goodyear has a strong Ohio connection. The town is named after the Akron-based Goodyear Tire and Rubber Co., which has major facilities there. A nearby town is named Buckeye, a nod to the numerous residents in the area with Ohio roots.

Spring training is big business in Arizona, bringing \$200 million to the economy each year, according to the state Sports and Tourism Authority. The agency uses surcharges on rental cars and hotel room taxes to fund stadium projects.

The tourism authority is expected to approve about \$30 million for the project. The city of Goodyear will kick in the remainder for the stadium, practice facilities and infrastructure.

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