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Massive sports resort project approved

Bob Challinor, Desert Valley Times

Desert Falls International Sports Resorts Developers decided to take a chance on Mesquite as the site of its sprawling 920-acre, **\$500-million sports resort.**

Tuesday afternoon city council decided to take a chance on Desert Falls.

Council unanimously approved a joint development agreement with Desert Falls International Sports Resorts Developers that would transform acreage set aside by the city in a planned unit development land bank into what Paul Morris of Desert Falls called **“the premiere location for amateur sports in the United States.”**

“Today you will again be asked to consider a proposal that will have a significant impact upon the Mesquite community, a project that will help us realize strategies and plans, **but at a scale never considered possible,**” City Manager Tim Hacker told council. **“The resort will be a mixture of fields and facilities that will cover the gamut of outdoor and indoor sports, primarily oriented on the amateur athlete, but with facilities of a quality and caliber for use by professional athletes.** The sheer number and types of fields and facilities proposed goes beyond anything contemplated for Mesquite, even considering our plans for the regional park.”

The proposed sports resort package presented Tuesday to city officials and a near packed house at a council special meeting included a wealth of amenities that included:

Adidas facilities – offices; deluxe restaurants; training facilities (two Olympic-size pools, two Olympic-size diving platforms and private workout center); six flex basketball/volleyball courts; racquetball courts; indoor track; therapy center (massage, saunas, spas); sports medicine facility and nutrition center.

Twelve sand beach volleyball courts and a main beach volleyball stadium with 300-400 seats.

A 15,000-seat softball stadium with natural turf, a softball hall of fame and sports memorabilia center.

A softball complex with four five-flex diamonds; concession stands; restrooms; scoring boxes and boards; announcer’s booth and day care facilities.

A 24-field soccer complex and 400-500-seat soccer stadium plus a park area with pavilions.

A 16-court tennis complex plus a 300-400-seat tennis stadium and a pickle ball court.

A golf course with 495 residential units (condos, townhomes and single-family homes).

A 3,000-5,000-seat outdoor football stadium with separate track and field area featuring long jump, high jump and shot put/discus throw set-ups.

An archery range that would house archery, bow hunting, a beginner range and concessions/information.

An indoor football/soccer stadium with 5,000-10,000 seats, artificial turf that also could be used for lacrosse. Attached to the stadium would be a water park with a “lazy river.”

An open-air street mall with food court; sports brands and exclusive shops; moving sidewalk and mixed-use buildings (commercial and retail) with housing.

A resort hotel and athlete village.

“An opportunity like this truly does not come every day and I am so thankful that all of us working together were able to accomplish what I believe will be a wonderful compliment to this community,” said Mayor Susan Holecheck. “I believe that if success comes to all aspects of this venture, it will **provide good paying jobs, recreational opportunities**, future economic development and add to our quality of life here in Mesquite. I particularly want to thank Tim Hacker, Rich Bohne and Cheryl Hunt, who – since the venture surfaced at Christmas time - rolled up their sleeves and were able to work on development of this venture so we could get through all of the due diligence issues so quickly.”

“This will make Mesquite the premiere location for amateur sports in the United States and the world.” said Morris, the legal, land-use and bonding expert with Desert Falls International.”

Morris, who said the **Desert Falls team had “decades of experience” working with and in local government, complimented the city’s and mayor’s attitudes and said**, “They’ve been fair, but they’ve been tough in negotiations.”

He said he obtained letters of commitments from Adidas softball to move all its programs here “when it is appropriate,” and said the Adidas Futures program would move here “if we proceed with this project.” He said the head of Adidas Sports planned to allow use of the company’s name as part of the complex and had other companies and organizations express interest and various levels of commitment to the sports resort.

Josh Olmstead, who has extensive experience in recreation, **said the sports resort would be “a state-of-the-art facility. There will be nothing like it in the country.** This will have everything you want in a sports complex from youth sports to seniors. It will be good for the athletes and the spectators. We want to create an experience for them like no other. Our experience with the Huntsman Games is that if you do a great job and provide great products, the people will come back.”

Olmstead said he **is working with more than 80 sports organizations to locate events at the resort.** The development will have facilities **for more than 30 sports**, he said. He has talked to the U.S. Archery and U.S. Olympic beach volleyball organizations about establishing training facilities at the resort. He also is looking to provide training facilities for professional athletes.

“The concept is just remarkable,” said Larry Becknell, the project engineer. “I’ve never come across a project like this. If there is such a thing, this is as close to being a recession-proof business as anything out there. This is a great location. I love the site. It has engineering challenges; we may have two to three million cubic yards of dirt to move around.”

Becknell said Desert Falls International planned to hire “the best architects in sports architecture out of Kansas City.

“Adidas will bring its athletes here for camps,” Becknell said. “Parents will bring their kids to camps. But we want your (regional park) facilities to be used as much as ours. Some of the facilities might need to be shifted a little. We want this to be a showcase for Mesquite.”

A.C. Green, Desert Falls partner and former Los Angeles Lakers basketball star, said Mesquite would be a great place to train and teach as well as relax and refresh.

“I’m totally excited about the project from a business standpoint,” Green said. “But I’m more excited about building relationships. I look forward to building with you youth foundation camps. I’ve had these camps for 25 years in Portland, Ore. and 20 years in Los Angeles. I’ll be bringing friends here to let them know what we’re doing.”

His A.C. Green Youth Foundation develops character in middle- and high-school-age youth in public school settings.

“Part of the program we do is about peer pressure, choosing friends wisely and pointing children in the right way,” Green said. “We try to raise fine leaders.”

Mark Meersman, who is in charge of finances for Desert Falls International, said financing for the project actually would “end up being a little simpler” because the sports resort would not contain a high residential and commercial impact. He said financing would be achieved in a two-step process.

“The first step would be to entitle the property,” he said. “Once we gain title to the property, the process gets under way. We will entertain local offers – banks and financial institutions – and keep as much business as possible local. We want the city to benefit from the economic project we have, to create jobs and revenue.

“The second step would be the long-term financing. That’s more challenging and it has more details. This would bring into play bonds or infrastructure bonds. Private placement of money would allow us to finish and make the project a successful one. This opportunity before us today is what we’re very excited about.”

“We worked hard on this around Christmas time,” Holecheck said. “This opportunity is so fortuitous. I hope to get through this. This is the type of opportunity that does not come along every day. The last thing you want to do is be on the phone when opportunity comes knocking. We wanted to make sure we were not on the phone.”

“If we – the city – can move forward at a reasonable rate to get permits, are you prepared to move as quickly as we are?” asked council member Bill Wells.

Morris said Desert Falls International wanted to have tournaments here by 2010.

“We have to move along,” he said. **“We’re looking at getting the entitlement by May.** We need to downzone the property from what you have now. We have others who aren’t here working actively with this.”

Morris said local residents would have job priority at the resort.

“For us to be viable, we have to have partners for years and years,” he said. “We have to have the local people involved. We need to have the right people (contractors) who know the land and what they’re doing.”

He said 500 employees would have jobs after build out.

“The jobs will not only be sports-specific but also hospitality,” Morris said.

Morris envisioned the sports resort and regional park having “a symbiotic relationship,” **adding that Olmstead planned to have “something week after week” at the resort.**

“The tournaments we’ll bring in will fill every (hotel) room here and in St. George,” Olmstead said. “There aren’t enough hotel rooms in town. One example is an archery tournament that will bring in 20,000 people. We’ll have 30 different sports with multiple tournaments. The first priority will be to fill the existing rooms up.”

The resort hotels will not have gaming, Olmstead said.

Morris said Desert Falls International has a strong level of commitment to using local companies and products.

“It’s in my DNA,” he said. “The best way to make a project a success is if we have buy-in from the citizens. Part of that is work.”

Morris said part of the long-term commitment the **project will have to the valley is the fiber-optic capability it will bring with the resort.**

“We need to have the fiber optics,” he said. “It lets people watch the competition when they can’t be

here. We'll be transmitting video from the fields to let people watch the experience. We'll have people filming. People can log onto games. We will provide redundant fiber optics to the property."

He said bringing in fiber optic from the Kern River fiber-optic tap-in point would cost approximately \$3 million.

"It's essential to this park," he said. "We need to bring fiber optic to this project. One of the beauties of fiber optics is that it makes bandwidth plentiful. We'll use a fraction of the capacity. We'll pay the cost to bring it in. It can be used for city facilities; that doesn't limit our ability to use it.

"The city manager said 'if you want land, you'll bring the fiber optics. We'll get it to the fire station (number 3); that's included in the agreement. It will be the point of presence. Then you'll have the opportunity to have it go to other places."

Council member Karl Gustaveson said the regional park was "a very popular element in the community. One element is the amphitheater, which I'm excited about. But it's probably one of the last choices to build. It's years away. Would an amphitheater work with you? We could partner with you and make sure you can make this dream come through."

"When we bring a lot of people in to watch an event, we have a captured audience," Morris said. "They ask, 'what's there to do here in the evening?' I'm sure there's a relationship we could work out."

Morris said the first phase of the project would begin "right away for tournaments." Other amenities would be driven by market needs, such as the hotels.

"Security lines and telecommunication centers for the facilities we'd be doing in the first phase," Becknell said. **"We need construction to bring in revenues and people. The whole thing will be phased in over four to five years. The softball will be in the first phase."**

Olmstead said he had visited the Olympic training facilities in Colorado Springs, Colo. and said he "was pretty disappointed. They looked like high school facilities. And you've got professional training facilities usually attached to colleges. Those are scattered around the country. We have athletes training on high school fields. We want a state-of-the-art facility they can't get anywhere else; for off-season training and rehabilitation."

Council member Randy Ence wondered if the development team had considered mitigating light pollution from its facilities.

"We spent a lot of time on that discussion," Morris said. "It doesn't matter who's here first. We want to be good neighbors. We'll have all-night tournaments in the summer. We'll be looking at the appropriate buffers on this. We're very sensitive to that issue. The entitlement will give us parameters. We'll live within them. But give us some flexibility on the buffers."

Council member David Bennett liked the "tourism-based, non-polluting" project and the fiber optics and road improvements included in the joint development agreement, but had questions about the financing.

"In this economy, how do you get \$500 million to build this over the next five years?" he asked. "I want to believe you. You have excellent ideas, but even for excellent ideas there's no dollars available."

Meersman said there was private pension money available, and Desert Falls International was looking into star bonds and moving money into long-term and preferred bonds.

Wells moved to approve the joint development agreement between the city and Desert Falls International.