

Many redevelopment experts like the reasoning behind the city's plan to demolish City Center in favor of a park and targeted construction, but worries about the economy abound.

## Trading mall for park has support

*But will cash appear to get things started?*

By Mike Pramik and Marla Matzer Rose  
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Despite the worst economy in generations, some experts say it makes sense to demolish Columbus City Center and convert the land into a park that later would be rimmed with a variety of developments.

Formal plans for turning the 9-acre chunk of Downtown into Columbus Commons were rolled out yesterday. The first step would be to tear down City Center, with hopes of starting that work this year.

Even backers admitted that the project will be a challenge, given the state of the economy. But that was one reason a time lag was built in. The project is expected to take up to 10 years to complete.

"It's a classic case of addition by subtraction," said Brian Ellis, president of Arena District developer Nationwide Realty Investors. "By taking City Center down and then developing a green space where it once stood while preserving the parking, that in itself is a major improvement for Downtown."

Once the mall is gone, plans call for creating a park by fall 2010, then surrounding it with residential, retail and office developments. Capitol South Urban Redevelopment Corp., the entity that developed the mall, projects that Columbus Commons would add 2,000 jobs to a southwestern part of Downtown dubbed RiverSouth.

James Newton, chief economic adviser at Commerce National Bank, called the plan "reasonable," assuming the city can secure federal money to help pay for the demolition of City Center.

"Is it odd to do something like this when we're in a fairly severe recession? Probably so, if you're funding it yourself," he said. "If they're able to get the federal money, it makes sense. It's a modest jobs creator, has a modest impact on the local economy and does away with retail space that has outlived its purpose."

The need for more office space is there, industry observers say.

The Downtown office vacancy rate was 11.1 percent at the end of 2008, according to the commercial real-estate firm Colliers Turley Martin Tucker. That would dictate a need for more space, said Richard Schuen, president of the Columbus office of Grubb & Ellis.

Schuen thinks the new office space would be snapped up quickly if the economy recovers, because companies tend to gravitate to new space that can be customized. Overall, the project is expected to add up to eight buildings, featuring 500,000 square feet of commercial and residential space.

"I think the Arena District has proven that," he said. "To renovate the mall, that would be crazy. They can rebuild new and have exactly what they want and give tenants what they are looking for."

The site is ripe for all types of development because it's so close to other renovations, Columbus retail analyst Chris Boring said.

"It's an important parcel for the community, and symbolically there should be public space in whatever they do," he said. "I can't really find too much to pick at."

Yet not everyone is pleased that City Center is coming down.

Columbus architect Frank Elmer of Lincoln Street Studios praised Capitol South's conversion of the Lazarus building from retail space to office space. He said he thinks City Center also could have been converted to other uses.

"If they can do Lazarus, which is an old (building), why can't they do a new mall?" he said. "Those old buildings are worth something, and you can renovate for less than building new."

"I don't think it's a forwardthinking idea, to tear more things down."

But Capitol South Chief Executive Officer Guy Worley said he studied the question for months and concluded that, on average, it would have cost \$250 a square foot to redevelop the mall. The high end for new office buildings typically is \$150 per square foot.

Georgetown Co., the development manager for Columbus Commons, likens the project to Bryant Park in midtown Manhattan, which Georgetown developed about 15 years ago.

"It was drug-infested and just kept people out," said Georgetown Co. President Adam Flatto. "It was awful. Now, it's become an anchor for a big resurgence in the area."

Newton thinks, though, that an influx of privately funded development could take longer than Capitol South is projecting.

"I would say private development of this type is going to lag badly for years behind the recession," Newton said. "There's going to be little interest in putting new retail into the Downtown. There are more housing units than a few years ago, but some of them have had to be auctioned off because the demand is so slack."

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**CRAIG HOLMAN DISPATCH**

The City Center shopping mall and aboveground parking garage shine under a light coating of snow. The city proposes razing the mall to make way for a large park and then residential, retail and office space.