

Commons design revolves around park

By Marla Matzer Rose
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

An expansive 6-acre park home to concerts and a patio cafe is part of the blueprint that's emerged for Columbus Commons, a park and mixed-use development planned for the City Center mall site.

Capitol South Urban Redevelopment Corp. plans to present designs for the project to the Downtown Commission on Tuesday, six months after the general plan was unveiled to the public.

Demolition of the mall is expected to begin in September, with the underground City Center parking garage and nearby streets remaining open. Plans call for the park to open in December 2010.

Privately financed Capitol South will pay for the demolition. The group makes money from parking and rent on Downtown buildings it controls, including the former Lazarus building. Federal stimulus money didn't come through for the demolition project and development of the park, estimated to cost between \$15 million and \$20 million.

The organization is "75 percent of the way there" toward raising that sum as it continues to look at all possible sources of funding, both public and private, said Guy Worley, president and chief executive officer of Capitol South.

It's taken longer than hoped to come up with a workable plan for the site of the once-bustling mall, which was taken over by the city in late 2007 and boarded up five months ago. The 20th anniversary of City Center's grand opening came and went unheralded this week.

Worley said Columbus Commons is a piece of a larger vision that's coming together for a part of town that, for years, hadn't benefited from redevelopment efforts elsewhere in the Downtown area.

"One of the guiding principles is that the project had to reinvigorate High Street as part of Mayor (Michael B.) Coleman's 'Mile on High' initiative," Worley said.

The design, he said, now calls for three buildings with six to seven stories of apartments over retail space fronting High Street. Capitol South is already in discussions with several interested developers, Worley said, though those buildings won't open for several years.

In the shorter term, Lifestyle Communities' new condominium and apartment complexes across from the Lazarus building are planned to open in October.

The new design for the Columbus Commons project was driven in part by practical concerns. Engineers have determined that the 1,000-space parking garage under the mall couldn't bear the weight of heavy traffic or high-rise buildings above it.

The underground parking was both a limitation and a great amenity for the project, which recently has been guided by the Georgetown Co., a New York company that is also co-developer of Easton Town Center. Three Columbus firms make up the design/build team for Columbus Commons: construction firm Corna-Kokosing, architects Moody Nolan and landscape architects EDGE Group.

"There are restrictions because we're building over a parking garage," said Curt Moody of Moody Nolan. "On the other hand, that large green area is going to be pristine and have a lot of flexibility for outdoor activities. Plus, you can park directly underneath. That's rare."

An outdoor stage area with a removable band shell is planned right behind Ohio Theatre. Edgar Lampert, vice chairman of the Georgetown Co., said programming is key to generating the crowds that will make Columbus Commons able to attract other private investment in the area.

Town Street will be reopened, but only as a pedestrian path.

"You can't assume that you can build it and they will come," said Lampert, whose firm revitalized

the rundown Bryant Park in midtown Manhattan a decade ago. "The project has to extend beyond the physical improvement. You need to maintain it and make it a compelling place. If you get good people to come to public spaces, it drives out bad people. ... The way good money drives out bad money in the basic law of economics."

The Columbus Association for the Performing Arts, which operates the Ohio and Palace theaters Downtown, will schedule events in the park, with concerts and possibly outdoor movies beginning in spring 2011

Columbus Commons will be a "focal point" for Downtown, said Bill Conner, president of CAPA. Asked about public skepticism of the project and its location, Conner pointed to the success of Huntington Park, which opened this year in the Arena District.

"The baseball park is a total success. It's standing room only all week this week," Conner said. "I think this really has the potential to be as successful as the baseball park has been."

Mark Corna, president of Corna-Kokosing, said it's been a long trip for his company to get to the building phase of Columbus Commons.

"We've been involved for about three years with several different developers and scenarios for City Center, but we could never make it work," Corna said. "I think people now are reconciled to the fact that this urban mall model hasn't worked, not just in Columbus but across the U.S."

Corna said he's excited to see the project progressing.

"It's an extremely complex, difficult project," he said. "I think considering everything involved, it's moved efficiently forward."

mrose@dispatch.com



CAPITOL SOUTH URBAN REDEVELOPMENT CORP .

Latest plans for the Columbus Commons show a band shell at the northern end, behind the Ohio Theatre.



