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Sports complex delay raises fears at mall

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By Eric Schwartzberg

Staff Writer

The delayed opening of Cincinnati Sports Zone, an anchor site in the redevelopment of the Cincinnati Mall, has left business owners concerned about the future of the sprawling shopping center.

The multi-faceted sports complex was announced by Nantucket Promotions in November 2011 to occupy 171,000 square feet once dedicated to Bigg's grocery store by this past summer. Then, in June, the company's three partners — Kerry Roell, Ken Roell and Nick Poe — said they were expanding plans for Cincinnati Sports Zone by purchasing the entire 270,000-square-foot facility once occupied by the grocery store chain to make the site "a complete sports complex" at a projected cost of \$8 million.

At the time, construction was about two-and-a-half months behind schedule and was not expected to be fully completed until this month.

But six months later, the site remains unopened as Cincinnati Mall owner World Properties LLC of New York and Nantucket Promotions work to negotiate the details of who is responsible for several million dollars in assessments associated with bonds issued by the Port of Greater Cincinnati Development Authority in 2004.

"The owner (of the mall) couldn't fulfill part of the contract, so we had to renegotiate," Kerry Roell said.

An agreement should be reached in a week or two, said Roell, who is hopeful about finalizing a new contract with the mall to get the business opened by the launch of hockey season next September.

"We'll probably start construction as soon as we close (on the deal)," Roell said.

Two-thirds of the mall sits in Forest Park in Hamilton County. The remainder of the property is in Fairfield in Butler County.

Karla Ellsworth, head of redevelopment and acting general manager for the mall, said all sides have been diligently working for months to come to an agreement that appeals to both cities, the bond trustee and the Port Authority.

"We're in the process of moving forward and getting closer to closing for them to resume their construction," Ellsworth said.

Denise Puska is one of several business owners who inked multi-year leases earlier this year in the hopes that Cincinnati Sports Zone would be drawing scores of people to the mall by now.

Puska said she closed The Big Dipper on Hancock Avenue in Hamilton in 2011 and signed a 3-year-lease for Brainfreeze Treats & Grill in April.

"At the time, they were projecting they were going to start construction (on Cincinnati Sports Zone) June 1, but that never happened and ... I didn't renew my lease with the other shop," she said. "Now I just don't know. They keep telling me they're working on a deal.

"If it stays the way that it is, I can't stay," she said. "We're just not going to make it."

Puska, who opened Brainfreeze in October, said she remains optimistic based upon floor work others have witnessed at the site.

"That means they haven't given up hope themselves for the Sports Zone," she said.

While the issues the two sides continue to work on do not involve the cities of Forest Park or Fairfield, both municipalities remain in support of them reaching a deal that would allow the project to move forward, according to Chris Anderson, Forest Park's community and economic development director.

The \$18 million worth of public financing agreed to by the mall's previous owners for the parking garage, the road encircling the complex and some of the parking areas needs to be paid back through a property assessment, Anderson said.

"There's an annual payment to the debt service on those bonds," he said. "My understanding is that for this deal to really work for the Sports Zone, they're looking to purchase the parcel that they would sit on, but they want to have that assessment either eliminated or paid by the mall."

"The mall asked the question: 'Can we just re-assign that money to the other parcels?' And the answer that came back from our attorney was: 'No. State law does not allow that,'" Anderson said.

What the mall could do is prepay the assessment or reach some separate agreement to make those payments on its behalf, he said.

Cincinnati Sports Zone likely has included a certain amount of debt service on the purchase of the property in its projected revenues, but any additional assessment could adversely affect their budget, Anderson said.

John Barron of Fairfield, who owns a human gyroscope ride across from Arcade Legacy, said some have labeled Cincinnati Mall "the ghost mall."

"It's one of the biggest malls in the region, and it's also one of the emptiest," he said. "It's beautiful but it also saddens me."

Despite the Cincinnati Sports Zone delay, Barron said he plans to stick around and would add more rides if the mall could gain more foot traffic.

He credits Ellsworth for the efforts she has made to help the mall reach its full potential.

"She's let a lot of vendors in here with the vending machines, the claw machines and the candy and the pop," Barron said. "If Karla (keeps working) as hard as she's working to bring this mall back, it would be almost like none of this ever happened."

Gary Sand, who typically visits the mall once or twice a week, said any deal that has been in the works for this amount of time should have been ironed out by now.

"Their issues are lasting too long," said Sand as he ate lunch at the mall's food court. "They've been talking about it too much and not doing nothing about it."

Sand said he hopes Cincinnati Sports Zone and other businesses can help return Cincinnati Mall to its glory days.

"It's close to me and it's a nice mall," Sand said.

Cincinnati Sports Zone: The Details

- Three sheets of ice for hockey, figure skating and recreational skating hockey
 - 30,000 square feet of synthetic turf for baseball, golf, lacrosse, gymnastics and cheering
 - 12 volleyball courts on temporary flooring that can be converted to basketball courts for Amateur Athletic Union tournaments.
 - A fitness-training facility that will allow athletes to work out prior to a game
 - A clinic with direct access to a training field and physical therapy.
 - Party rooms, a restaurant and a sports bar.
 - 18,000 square feet of office space
- Facility can be used for "almost anything" a large arena might host, including concerts and car shows.

Source: Nantucket Promotions

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