River Run project aims for balance

Officials hope to pull together plans for 500-acre development in the next 6 months

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BENTON HARBOR — Balance.

That word is likely to be the most critical in discussions over the next few months about River Run, a 500-acre residential, commercial and recreational development straddling the Paw Paw River that could become reality or dissolve into an unrealized dream.

"If we can't pull it together in the next six months, that means there's not enough for a deal to be struck. If that's the case, we certainly hope it's because someone has a better idea," said Jeff Noel, Whirlpool's vice president of communications and public affairs.

He and Mark Mitchell, president and CEO of Alliance, a community group that is involved in planning River Run, said during an interview Saturday with The Herald-Palladium they're almost ready to present a development plan that leaves plenty of room for public input. The plan will be presented at public forums in St. Joseph, Benton Harbor and Benton Township this summer, but only if investors, community leaders and a major developer all agree to invest time and energy.

River Run is a proposed housing and recreation development promoters say has the potential to add $125 million to Benton Harbor's tax base. It would be built over the next 10 to 15 years on property along the St. Joseph and Paw Paw rivers in Benton Harbor and a small portion of St. Joseph. Whirlpool, Cornerstone Alliance, the cities of Benton Harbor and St. Joseph, and Berrien County have talked about the idea for two years. They have worked with Melrose Co., one of the nation's largest recreational and residential community developers, to come up with a plan that includes a Jack Nicklaus signature golf course.

"It's all about shared investment," Noel said. "The questions we need to answer before we move forward are "Does it make economic sense?" "Does the community support it?" and "Are there benefits that can be spelled out?"

"We've already asked 'If not this, what?' and 'If not now, when?' Now we're ready to ask 'Are there any better ideas out there?'" Noel said.

Mitchell said the true drivers of the proposal will not be Whirlpool or the Alliance, but private investors who'll identify what they're going to need to move forward.

"This project will only become reality if the economics warrant an investor investing, the tangible benefits to the units of government warrant their participation and support, and if there's a community benefits agreement that spells out how the community
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will participate and benefit as well," he said.

Noel added: "All three of these elements must be balanced enough that there is a willingness to share in responsibilities in order to share opportunities."

Mitchell said a community benefits agreement, a tool used in many communities over the past two decades, spells out exactly what’s in it for communities and what they will need to do to help meet those objectives.

He said the agreement can include commitments to create jobs and training programs, two things Benton Harbor has been seeking.

He said one idea includes training programs centered on landscaping, allowing young people to work at the golf course while learning landscaping skills that can lead to long-term, lucrative careers.

Noel said the River Run plan still has a lot of room for community input about what should surround and mix with new houses and the golf course.

"We’ve heard suggestions of an indoor water park, restaurants near the water, public access to fishing along the Paw Paw River, natural trails through the wetlands, a partnership with the Boys & Girls Club that will train kids to be caddies," Noel said.

"Unrealistic and obtrusive views will not allow this project to work. But good, tangible ideas like this are what will allow this project to fit in, not be an add-on."

For River Run to move forward, plans also must be attractive to private investors.

"It's about balance. It won't work unless it can sustain the kind of investment to warrant the cleanup, remediation and construction, to stimulate the commercial and residential development of this property," Noel said.

A group hoping to build an aquarium near the Paw Paw River recently scrapped its plans after the land was deemed unsuitable for heavy construction because it's mostly wetlands.

Noel said the aquarium would have fit in well with the River Run plan, and he and city officials are helping to look for an alternative site in Benton Harbor. The area would support the golf course because the wetlands can become part of its natural features.

Noel and Mitchell said they'll take their River Run proposal to Whirlpool senior leaders in the coming weeks. The plan would move on to the Alliance, Cornerstone, the Council for World Class Communities, the Partnership for Lifelong Learning and Citizens for Progressive Change.

The next step would be to present a formal proposal with detailed plans to mayors and city managers in Benton Harbor and St. Joseph and the Benton Township supervisor. The project area touches on a small part of the township.

"The question at that point will be 'Do we want to participate in this project?' and if they wish to go forward, they will start the process of meetings with their commissioners and boards," Noel said.

He anticipates that by late June or early July, the River Run plan will be unveiled at public meetings.

Noel said at that point, the fate of River Run will be up to the communities.

But Noel stressed that if someone has a better idea of what should be done with hundreds of acres of seemingly worthless land, he'd certainly like to hear it.

"Room for community input? Absolutely. Whirlpool's not looking for a financial reward. We're looking for long-term stability for this community. Benton Harbor needs a self-sustained tax base, not grant after grant," he said.

Noel admitted that the River Run development would benefit Whirlpool, in one sense.

"World-class companies need world-class people, and world-class people determine whether they'll come to live and work somewhere based on the quality of life in the community," he said.

He stressed that there's no commitment to the current plan.

"There are no commitments or pre-conceived notions. There's just a good idea that has had some significant investment and the determination to create something that can benefit all the residents, not just a few," he said.