Road map to the future?

Proponents of the 500-acre River Run development say it could change the face of the Twin Cities—if everybody works together.

By JULIE SWIDWA
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BENTON HARBOR — How do you turn several seemingly worthless parcels of land into something of value? If you're the cities of Benton Harbor and St. Joseph, Berrien County, the Whirlpool Corp. and Cornerstone Alliance, you put your heads together, package the property into one 500-acre deal, investigate realistic possibilities and come up with an idea that could forever change the face of the Twin Cities and create financial self-sustainability for Benton Harbor.

"There will be people who will say it can't be done here. To them, I will vehemently argue 'Yes, it can,'" said Jeff Noel, Whirlpool's vice president of communications and public affairs and until recently the top person at Cornerstone.

Noel and Tony McGhee, Cornerstone's vice president of physical development and business attraction, along with key city officials, have been in on the ground floor of planning for River Run, a proposed development that promoters say has the potential to add $125 million to Benton Harbor's tax base.

Noel said that after public input and final planning, "dirt will fly" by 2006 on the project, expected to take 10-15 years to complete.

Benton Harbor City Manager Dwight "Pete" Mitchell deferred to other sources for details, but said that for his city, "If this goes, the sky's the limit."

The two cities, Whirlpool, Cornerstone and Berrien County have partnered with Melrose Co., based in South Carolina, to explore possibilities for the 500 acres, most of which is in Benton Harbor.

Founded in 1984, the Melrose Co. is one of the nation's largest and most active recreational and residential community developers, with projects completed or under way in Colorado, Utah, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Georgia, Indiana and Texas.

"They've taken big chunks of land and, by assembling all of it, created value to attract development," Noel said.

Melrose has created some of the nation's best-known recreational communities, including the 4,000-acre Hilton Head Plantation on Hilton Head Island, the Sagamore club in Indiana and the Tradition's Club at Texas A&M. Hilton Head Plantation is a residential neighborhood boasting four golf courses, miles of bike and jogging trails, two nature conservancies, tennis courts, a community recreation center, boating facilities, swimming pools and gardens.

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‘Making money on those two (22-acre and 18-acre) parcels is a slam dunk. But ... Whirlpool has so much as said if we sell those parcels alone, we’ve lost the opportunity to help Benton Harbor. If we don’t put all this land together, the rest is basically worthless.’

JEFF NOEL

For Benton Harbor, the company is exploring several possible strategies, including housing, outdoor recreation such as a golf course and boating and fishing, or an amusement park.

McGhee and Noel said for the people involved in the project, the objective is twofold: create a meaningful tax base for Benton Harbor and give people a reason to leave Interstate 94 or Michigan 63 to visit the Twin Cities area.

River Run would be connected to the Edgewater district, a mixed-use residential and commercial development that over the past seven years reportedly has brought more than 450 jobs to St. Joseph.

Noel said one of Melrose’s proposals for River Run would create 500 jobs in the construction phase alone.

‘If not now, when?’

The River Run proposal, which will be presented at a series of public meetings in February and March, would be built on several connecting parcels of land, most of which are east of Michigan 63 in Benton Harbor.

Much of the land is owned by the city, Cornerstone or Whirlpool. Privately-owned businesses and sections of town such as the arts district would be left intact as a good blend with the new development.

Some of the land is contaminated and would require environmental cleanup. St. Joseph, Benton Harbor and Berrien County have applied for a total of $3 million in grant money for cleanup.

Noel and McGhee said the location and history of some of the parcels present some limitations.

The waterfront, though, is an asset. More important, today’s