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Major mall proposed in Joliet

Upscale, 'pedestrian friendly' center would be located near I-55 and I-80

By Dennis Sullivan
Special to the Tribune

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The 1.7 million-square-foot shopping center planned for Interstate Highways 55 and 80 in Joliet would dwarf the existing Westfield Louis Joliet Mall and mirror the upscale Oakbrook Center, the California-based developer said.

Chris Shane, vice president of acquisitions for O&S Holdings Inc., said the firm initially would mix entertainment and restaurants with "big box" retailers, national department stores, specialty stores and a no-frills hotel in a "pedestrian friendly" environment. In the future, the development could be expanded by 1.2 million square feet to accommodate offices and a hotel-convention center, he said.

Shane told the City Council's Public Service Committee this week that the firm has contracts on 15 contiguous parcels, or about 320 acres.

"I'd like to be moving dirt next year," he said, adding that the mall could open as early as 2009. "This is a hard corner and a major intersection; you can't do better."

O&S, with 80 developments in its portfolio, has pushed plans for developing the Joliet site as a "mixed-use, open-air lifestyle center" for about a year, but with little public fanfare.

City Planning Director Don Fisher said the proposed "super regional mall" would be nearly twice the size of the 950,000-square-foot Westfield Louis Joliet Mall. He termed the O&S project a "modern version" of the roughly 2 million-square-foot Oakbrook Center in Oak Brook, with "a major hotel and conference center, and major movies."

Fisher said the project's upscale nature and visibility translate into "our best chance of getting corporate offices in the city of Joliet."

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The proposal came to light recently at hearings on a controversial proposal to build a highway through the Joliet Junior College campus that would connect I-55 with Houbolt Road. City Manager John Mezera said revisions to the east-west connector plans accommodate concerns about safety, security, land use and environmental impact.

Mezera said the retail-office project could produce as much as \$15 million to \$20 million a year in sales tax revenue.

Joliet would provide some infrastructure improvements but won't otherwise subsidize the development, he said. The city also wants 50 percent of sales taxes earmarked to pay back bonds for Houbolt Road access improvements. The rest would go into general revenue, he said.

Some council members expressed concerns, including Finance Committee Chairman Tony Uremovic, who noted the developer is touting the location on its Web site "without our approval."

But Fisher noted that O&S has "to bring all the retailers in themselves to investigate" whether the site meets their expectations. "They have to market themselves and they have to market the site."

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