

## '(IT'S) GOING TO PUT US ON THE MAP'

### PROPOSED JOLIET MALL HAS SOME EXCITED AND OTHERS CONCERNED.

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By **BOB OKON** Staff writer

JOLIET -- The proposed Bridge Street Town Centre mall means many things to different people.

It could be 1.5 million square feet of retail and restaurant space unlike anything Joliet has had before.

It could drastically alter campus life at Joliet Junior College, creating a commercial route close to the college.

It could be the big source of business and revenue for the city for the next decade, doing for Joliet what casino gambling did in the 1990s.

It could spoil a small neighborhood of longtime homeowners who have enjoyed relative peace and quiet for decades.

It could make Joliet a retail destination spot for a wide region, being the first big metropolitan lifestyle center on the way to Chicago.

It could intrude on woods and wetlands, bringing suburban-style development and congestion to one more corner of Will County.

#### The corner

The corner in question is the northeast segment of the interchange of Interstates 55 and 80 -- a crossroads of mid-America site that sparks the imaginations of land developers.

Each day, 266,400 cars pass by on the two interstates, according to developer O&S Holdings.

The Santa Monica, Calif.-based developer wants to build a 1.5 million-square-foot lifestyle retail center on 325 acres. The company also has plans for hotels and homes for the site.

"It's a whole new area that's going to put us on the map," City Councilman Tim Brophy said.

Brophy last month visited another one of O&S Holdings' Bridge Street Town Centre developments in Huntsville, Ala. The company is using the same name in both Huntsville and Joliet. Brophy came back to Joliet impressed.

"It was really surprising to see in northern Alabama these high-end places that you'd expect to see in New York, Los Angeles and Miami," he said.

Brophy pointed in particular to the Dolce restaurant, part of the celebrity-owned Dolce Group that is based out of Los Angeles. But he also was impressed by the 14-screen Monaco Pictures movie theater, which has a bar in its lobby and meeting rooms for Super Bowl parties and other special events.

Some of the stores at Huntsville include Ann Taylor Loft, Banana Republic and Coldwater Creek. The center also has a Westin hotel.

The O&S Web site features pictures of the Huntsville center, which shows gondolas on a lake. Indeed, the center is styled on a European theme, and there are gondolas, Brophy said. Although, he's been told, the Joliet center would be designed with a downtown theme and would be different.

#### Done deal?

All this will be on display at a Land Use Committee meeting at 1:30 p.m. Monday at City Hall.

O&S will present its plans for Joliet. City staff will present details of a \$90 million-plus development agreement that would use about half of the sales taxes from the shopping center to pay for road improvements.

Those improvements include a new I-55 interchange north of Interstate 80 to give access to the shopping center. A new road also would be built east to Houbolt Road to create another access point to Bridge Street Town Centre.

That connecting road has people at Joliet Junior College worried because the city wants a part of the campus for the route. And some are concerned that the project will steamroll ahead without the college having a chance to carefully examine the impact.

"We have absolutely nothing concrete about what the plan actually is," said William Johnson, an agriculture professor who has been at JJC since the campus was developed.

Johnson said he and others at the college are worried that the city will present an exciting plan with tremendous economic potential and put the college in a position where it will be awkward to resist.

"They're going to come to the college and say this is all in place. All that's needed is your cooperation," Johnson said. "I'm afraid that's what's going to happen."

Details on the road plan may not be ready for the Monday meeting.

City Manager John Mezera last week said that an engineering study has yet to be completed. That engineering study would lay out the road map for the interchange and connector route. And, Mezera said he would go to JJC to seek its approval once the study is done.

But City Councilman Joseph Shetina, who chairs the Land Use Committee, said he would like to hold a special city council meeting within the next week or so to approve land annexations and take other actions to move the project forward.

"It's nothing new to anybody," Shetina said of the project. "I want to move it along as rapidly as possible."

### **Woods and wetlands**

The plan for the project came out in May 2007. But much of the work has been behind the scenes as city staff worked on the development agreement to finance the interchange and new road. The project has been discussed at times at city council committee meetings.

But Monday will be the first time that O&S Holdings appears at a public meeting to present its plans. By Thursday, the city's Plan Commission will hold annexation hearings to vote on whether or not to bring land into the city for business zoning.

"They're just plowing it along," said Chris Book, a Joliet resident and member of the Will County Environmental Network. That group and other environmental organizations have questions about the impact of the plan on wetlands and woods in the area.

"There are legitimate questions," Book said. "We're just looking for some answers."

### **Rock Run Drive**

O&S was to host a meeting this weekend with residents along Rock Run Drive, whose homes would be overshadowed by the Bridge Street Town Centre.

It's a small area with about 17 homes, and, "Most of the neighbors are long-time residents," said Lynda Dowden, who has lived there since 1974.

"We have...wildlife and beautiful sunsets, which we will lose as soon as that development goes up," Dowden said.

Another concern is the water table. When the Rock Run Industrial Park, located near Joliet Junior College, was built in the 1990s, Dowden and other neighbors had to dig deeper wells because the water table dropped.

"We don't know yet how they're planning for water," Dowden said last week.

### **Open communication**

So far, the city has been doing what it can to make sure the Bridge Street Town Centre comes to town. And, it's likely to have a broad appeal across the city.

How well its received in the immediate neighborhood depends on what happens next.

City Councilwoman Jan Quillman, who is typically responsive to citizens' concerns, said she expects "the lines of communications to be open" and questions to be answered.

"As far as I'm concerned people are going to be informed about this," Quillman said. "It's going to be a good thing."

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