

Project could change city's image

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By **BOB OKON** Staff writer

JOLIET -- The Bridge Street Town Centre could do more than any of the big projects of recent years in transforming Joliet's image, at least in the eyes of a number of city officials and community leaders.

"That's going to be the project that will make the most difference in the image of the city of Joliet," said City Manager John Mezera.

When Mezera and others talk about changing the Joliet image, they typically want to cast out stereotypes of steel mills and prisons that are part of the city's proud past but not necessarily helpful in attracting modern development to town.

Nevertheless, Joliet in the last two decades, has added two casinos, Chicagoland Speedway, a private motor sports club and minor-league baseball -- all big projects that have made Joliet a place to go for people far beyond the city limits.

2011 target opening

The Bridge Street Town Centre, slated to open in 2011, would join that list if built as planned.

The 316-acre project would be bigger than most lifestyle retail centers, city officials say. It would include upscale shopping and unique restaurants. A full-service hotel is in the plans. So is corporate office space.

Developer O&S Holdings forecasts more than 3,000 jobs at the various businesses that would open at Bridge Street Town Centre.

All of this would be placed in a uniquely designed setting. Architects have designed what they call "Central Park" in the center of the outdoor mall with a pond and landscaping. Open space is set aside for casual gathering and unique events.

"There are not many projects of this quality, this size, and this well thought out," said Drew Barkett of Strategic Retail Development. Barkett is working with O&S Holdings in trying to attract retailers and restaurants to the Bridge Street Town Centre.

Unique Joliet mall

California-based O&S Holdings says it has more than 9 million square feet of real estate under control now. The company recently created a Bridge Street Town Centre brand and opened a lifestyle center of the same name in Huntsville, Ala., last year.

The Alabama center includes a lake with boat rides. Another O&S Holdings development, Louisiana Boardwalk in Bossier City, La., has a trolley car on rails designed to add to the atmosphere.

Don Fisher, director of planning for Joliet, said that the location, size and uniqueness of the Joliet mall would create a potential market stretching as far west as the Quad Cities and as far south as Bloomington.

"My opinion is that this is our chance to continue to drastically improve the image of our community," Fisher said. "This is high-quality, high design."

Of course, the Bridge Street Town Centre would have to be built first. Stores and restaurants would have to be brought in. Another Joliet development, the 39-acre Tower Marketplace of Joliet (formerly called Bronk's Corners), is supposed to attract upscale stores and restaurants. Only three tenants have been named since the project was announced with enthusiasm more than two years ago, and nothing has been built yet.

But O&S Holdings' track record and the boldness of its plan has created high hopes that go beyond City Hall.

John Greuling, chief executive of the Will County Center of Economic Development, called Bridge Street Town Centre an "image-changing" project and has backed it at recent city meetings.

The Joliet Region Chamber of Commerce & Industry also has urged support for the plan.

"We feel that this is a key to our future," said Russ Slinkard, chief executive of the chamber. "It is a project that will certainly enhance our image beyond our own borders."

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