

Retrieved May 9, 2011 from: <http://www.postregister.com/story.php?accnum=1002-05072011&today=2011-05-07>

Printed on: May 07, 2011

A look at how the site for a proposed events center was chosen



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One 20-acre cow pasture is much like another, until it becomes the proposed site of a hotly debated events center.

Should a May 17 ballot measure to form an auditorium district pass, 20 acres near Snake River Landing in Idaho Falls will become the site of a multi-use events center.

In the meantime, some Idaho Falls voters are concerned because they don't know how or why the site was chosen. Since the project is touted as a boon to Snake River Landing's businesses, those voters said they want to know that the process was objective.

"I still have a lot of questions about this thing," Kristy Daniells said. "I don't think this was some kind of conspiracy, but I do want to know that things were fair."

Michael Cunningham said he felt the site was sprung on the public.

"It's like they're suddenly saying, 'We're going to put it here,' and even though I think Snake River Landing is an OK idea, I was just like, 'What? Why?'" he said. "And we're hearing a lot now that maybe it wasn't on the up and up. Before I vote, I'd want an overview."

Greater Idaho Falls Area Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Robb Chiles, project manager Bob Everhart, Grow Idaho Falls CEO Linda Martin, architect Kevin Dekold and attorney Jon Stenquist served on the site selection committee.

The panel sent out a public request for site proposals in 2009.

When it did, Ball Ventures Chief Development Officer Eric Isom said Snake River Landing and Ball Ventures owner Allen Ball saw an opportunity to do something he'd wanted to for many years -- donate land for a public facility.

"It seemed like a good opportunity," Isom said.

Since then, auditorium district opponent Chuck Everett's questions about Ball's motives have been frequent and in some cases accusatory. Everett owns Boise-based AmeriTel Inns.

"There have been a lot of things said about us," Isom said. "Most of them are not true. Anywhere this went, the businesses around it would have benefited. That doesn't mean the community doesn't benefit."

When asked where the center should be located, Everett said that wasn't his concern. His concern is the 5 percent hotel tax that would finance the events center's construction.

"I would have opposed this thing anywhere they tried to put it," he said.

The Snake River Landing proposal criticized by Everett was one of 12 proposals the site selection committee received.

"We looked at a lot of areas of town," Martin said. "We tried to figure out how to get it at the end of Lindsay Boulevard, and we looked at a few sites downtown. We found a lot of parcels, but none that fit the needs we had."

For some sites on the edges of town, there was no easy access to utilities. Others had buildings on the property and would have racked up demolition bills. Still others would have required a parking structure.

Economic Research Associates, the company that conducted a 2008 feasibility study for the events center, weighed the 19 criteria and scored the top three sites.

"The Snake River Landing site scored the highest, primarily due to its location and integration into the overall mixed-use development with high visibility site and location directly off Interstate 15, as well as master-planned elements," according to the study's site selection appendix.

Isom said no one at Ball Ventures knew the Snake River Landing site was on the short list.

"We've stayed out of this almost completely because we do have an interest in it," Isom said. "We're excited about the possibilities for the community if this project can go forward."

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The short list

Three sites made the site selection committee's short list. They are as follows. All sites would require some additional access road construction.

Sunnyside North Property

Owned by Teton Peaks Investment

39 acres

Adjacent to Interstate 15

Estimated price \$6.8 million

East side of Interstate 15

Sunnyside South Property

Owned by Teton Peaks Investment

34 acres

Adjacent to Interstate 15

Estimated price \$5.9 million

Would need to be annexed and rezoned

East side of Interstate 15

Snake River Landing

Owned by Ball Ventures

20.45 acres

Adjacent to Snake River Parkway

Land would be donated to project

West side of Interstate 15