

Racing to Tomorrow

By Nick Green Staff Writer

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Developer Chris Meany's Hollywood Park Tomorrow proposal would retain the Hollywood Park Casino at the 238-acre site and add 620,000 square feet of retail space and eventually 3,000 homes. (Scott Varley/Staff Photographer)

Exactly a decade ago, basketball's Los Angeles Lakers and hockey's L.A. Kings left Inglewood, leaving the South Bay city bereft of a sense of identity.

Its broad Avenue of Champions, which once carried thousands of boisterous sports fans, remains an underused traffic artery abandoned by the fleeing franchises.

Historic Hollywood Park remains, but now just 8,000 or so fans visit the aging edifice on horse racing days. It is a shabby 71-year-old monument to a sport in irrevocable decline.

"We were the City of Champions and when you used to say it people didn't question it because you had the Lakers and the Kings and the racetrack," said Councilman Danny Tabor. "Now when you say City of Champions folks hesitate and say, 'What are you talking about?' It means we have to redefine ourselves."

That redefinition is drawing closer.

Stockbridge Real Estate Fund, a San Francisco-based pension fund that purchased the 238-acre Hollywood Park site for \$260 million in 2005, has proposed a \$2 billion to \$3 billion project on what it touts is the largest tract of developable land remaining in Los Angeles.

Hollywood Park Tomorrow, as the proposal is known, consists of a walkable, mixed-use development of homes, offices and stores. It includes a 25-acre park system complete with two lakes and a waterfall between them intended to evoke the racetrack's infield and double as a method of cleaning urban runoff.

Almost 3,000 homes, designed to house 8,000 to 10,000 residents of varying income levels, are planned.

The more than 600,000 square feet of retail space envisioned will consist not of big-box stores, but a 1,200-foot-long outdoor mall with movie theaters.

That main street is anchored by civic plazas at either end, intended to provide a sense of place for residents and visitors.

"We're creating the village heart here that we can then wrap residential around," said Chris Meany, a



A developer's map shows the locations of major shopping centers around Inglewood. The area is currently underserved by retailers, but the Hollywood Park Tomorrow development would include a 1,200-foot long outdoor mall, movie theaters and two civic plazas. (Scott Varley/Staff Photographer)

principal with Wilson Meany Sullivan, the development arm of Stockbridge. "Our plan, we believe, has really grown out of a home-grown local effort to change their world."

Indeed, the project, which sits between two flight paths to Los Angeles International Airport, is perhaps notable for the lack of community opposition.

On one level that's understandable, given the oceans of empty, visually unappealing parking lots and rundown businesses - at least those that aren't boarded up - that surround Hollywood Park.

But these days virtually any large project is likely to encounter detractors. Especially massive ones like Hollywood Park Tomorrow that its preliminary environmental analysis concedes will have several significant and unavoidable environmental effects on traffic and the like.

But unlike an ill-fated Wal-Mart proposal rejected by voters in 2004, Hollywood Park has largely been embraced by the community.

"They have had an untold number of community meetings both day and night where they were inviting people to voice their opinions," said Billy Campbell, an insurance company owner and member of Mayor Roosevelt Dorn's business advisory committee. "As a result, they have caused (residents) to feel they are a part of the development."

Perhaps most significantly, Hollywood Park Tomorrow is not merely a discount retailer providing low-wage jobs.

It promises to provide upscale stores residents largely have to leave town to patronize today.

There will be four new parks and jogging trails providing green space and recreational amenities that simply don't exist in the city now.

Meany claims traffic will actually improve in the area even after the project is built because of computerized upgrades to 19 surrounding intersections.

And it brings an estimated 19,000 construction and permanent jobs as well as more than \$100 million in new revenue for the city.

"There is \$6 billion of disposable income in our immediate area ... projected to go to \$9 billion in 10 years," said Meany, tracing an arc around the project site that shows the dearth of large malls nearby.

Still, the deepening recession means neither Meany nor the city is in any rush to get the project started.

The company had originally anticipated beginning work at the end of last year.

But the city's slow review of the project that has lasted more than a year delayed those plans, something the developers now see as a blessing in disguise. (Similarly, a Planning Commission meeting to take public comment on the draft environmental analysis originally scheduled for Wednesday was abruptly pushed back a week on Friday).

The idea is to receive the necessary regulatory approvals so Inglewood is poised to capitalize when an economic rebound begins.

"I don't know when we're going to deliver housing - somewhere between three and 10 years from now," Meany said. "I don't think you can sell a house today."

Nevertheless, work is likely to begin renovating the Hollywood Park Casino - virtually the only part of the present site that will be retained - next year.

The casino will be discreetly tucked in behind the main retail thoroughfare, a nod to the distinctly different clienteles the two elements are expected to draw.

Tabor, whose council district borders the project, acknowledges that Inglewood's image remains its biggest problem.

The perception of Inglewood as a crime-ridden inner city community with well-publicized problems - a federal probe of its Police Department began last week - remains.

Hollywood Park Tomorrow is seen in large measure as an antidote to that reputation.

"It is a revitalization and it's a continuation of the revitalization of Inglewood being the commercial center of the South Bay," Tabor said. "I say that not to take anything away from Del Amo (Fashion Center) ... but the scale and the concept that is Hollywood Park Tomorrow looks 50 miles out and projects us to be a regional destination for entertainment, for shopping and providing a liveable, lifestyle community."

Marc Little, president of a group called Partners For Progress, a coalition of the city's largest businesses, and general counsel for the Forum and the church - Faithful Central Bible Church - that owns it, sees something more in the development proposal.

Almost as important as the tangible benefits it will bring are the intangible elements to a community whose collective pride and character was undermined by the loss of some of Southern California's most beloved sporting icons.

No longer will the freeways that ring Inglewood provide an escape route for its residents to relax or spend money elsewhere, Little said.

"Now the residents can stay and work in Inglewood instead of leaving and in addition others will be driven to Inglewood - this development will be the gateway to the South Bay," he said. "Now Inglewood can become a destination place as it was in the heyday of the Lakers and the Kings."

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

Hollywood Park Tomorrow would include:

About 3,000 new homes

620,000 square feet of retail space in an outdoor mall

75,000 square feet of office space

Possible 300-room hotel

25 acres of parks and other recreational amenities

Four acres for a new school

\$100 million in new tax revenues

19,000 construction and permanent jobs created

WHAT'S NEXT?

A public hearing to review a draft environmental analysis of the Hollywood Park Tomorrow project is scheduled for 7 p.m. March 25 in the City Council Chamber, Ninth Floor, Inglewood City Hall, 1 Manchester Blvd.