

Tenants eager for Aksarben Village

The central Omaha redevelopment project will blend retail, entertainment, residential and office uses.

For businesses and organizations planning a move to the new Aksarben Village, the choice was a lot about the neighbors they'll have.

The redevelopment of so much ground in a midtown location offers a chance for new and larger spaces in the midst of an already established, dense population.

Mostly, however, the businesses -- including a movie theater and a grocer -- like who their neighbors will be in the complex of shops, restaurants, offices, apartments, town houses, hotel, fitness center and park near single-family neighborhoods and college campuses.

The mosaic created by eclectic pieces that will make up Aksarben Village will "completely change the way people view the dinner-and-a-movie experience," said Bill Barstow, owner of Main Street Theatres, which plans a 12-screen theater as part of the project.

A location close to the Kiewit Institute is "a huge, huge benefit" for Olsson Associates, said Brad Strittmatter, vice president of the engineering firm.

"We hire a lot of students part time and would like to keep them on after they graduate," he said.

Terry Fairfield, chief executive officer of the University of Nebraska Foundation, said the Aksarben site brings the foundation's Omaha offices closer to NU's two Omaha campuses while keeping officials in the midst of the business community.

Mike Schwartz of Wohlner's Grocery said he likes the project's emphasis on pedestrians and the mix of retail and office space close to where people live.

"This will be a real community," he said.

Some of the village's prospective tenants and their plans:

The Cosmopolitan Theatre

Reinventing what customers think of as the traditional theater is the goal of Main Street Theatres for its 12-screen project in the entertainment district of Aksarben Village.

Owner Barstow said the multilevel theater will be Omaha's first to use digital projection. The use of that technology, 3D presentation and multimedia will allow corporate and educational use of the facility to be part of the business plan, Barstow said. He said he also could envision the facility being used for pay-per-view concerts and catered events.

Auditoriums of up to 300 seats will feature not only high-volume commercial films, he said, but also two smaller "loungetype" auditoriums catering to upscale adult clientele with expanded food and drink service.

Most of Omaha's new theaters have been on the fringes of the metro area, but Barstow said his Plattsmouth-based company is used to going against the norm. He has built, bought and sold a number of theaters since forming the company in 1988 after retiring from the Air Force, and he now has 37 screens at seven locations in Nebraska and Iowa.

The theaters range from the historic Pioneer Theatre in Nebraska City to the new Promenade Cinema 14 in Sioux City, Iowa, that is part of a downtown redevelopment effort.

Barstow said his passion matched the passion of the officials at Magnum Development, and he was impressed with the Aksarben Village vision of a complete town within the city that has an upscale, cosmopolitan feel. That's where the theater's name came from.

"The name of our company is Main Street Theatres, and we want to be just that: a company that's small and local but, at the same time, knocks you over with all the gee-whiz things you can put in a theater," Barstow said.

Wohlner's Grocery

Owner Schwartz takes seriously the responsibility he's inherited for the family grocery store at 52nd and Leavenworth Streets.

Schwartz commissioned a market study and rejected free rent downtown as he contemplated a move aimed at gaining space while still providing personalized service and a focus on quality meats, fine wines and specialty products.

After much study and wooing, he chose Aksarben Village.

A new Wohlner's will occupy about 14,500 square feet on the first floor of a building on the northeast corner of 67th Street and West Center Road.

Employees no longer will have to mix the sourdough bread in one area of the basement, carry it to another area for proofing and then up the stairs to be baked.

Schwartz said he was impressed by the integrity of the Noddle Companies and the fact that "the facility they're making available to me is about perfect for what I was looking for."

"I believe in what they're creating there," he said.

Schwartz operates the business opened by his grandfather, one of several brothers who ran neighborhood markets in Omaha. Schwartz started his career by carrying bags of groceries at age 7.

His grandfather, Albert Wohlner, opened his first grocery at 19th and Fort Streets in 1900. He moved to 30th and California Streets after World War I and then to Leavenworth Street in 1934.

That 72-year-old location has about 7,000 square feet of display space and a similar amount of storage and preparation space.

The new store will have a sitdown delicatessen, and Wohlner's will start making pastries from scratch. The variety of products carried, Schwartz said, will have better display and be obvious to new customers as well as long-timers who know what they're looking for.

"Basically, it's showing off everything we do now. It'll be one of a kind, and it's Omaha's own."

Olsson Associates

The engineering and planning firm is celebrating its 50th year and a growth spurt in Omaha by planning to more than double its office space.

The Aksarben Village location "is a natural fit for us," said Brad Strittmatter, vice president.

Olsson Associates provides engineering, planning, landscape architecture, surveying, construction observation and environmental sciences services.

The employee-owned company of about 600 employees also has offices in Lincoln, where the company started; Grand Island, Hastings, Holdrege, Scottsbluff and South Sioux City, Neb.; Overland Park, Kan.; Riverside and Springfield, Mo.; Phoenix and Tucson, Ariz.; Minneapolis; Denver; and Sioux City, Iowa.

Its Omaha-area projects include the Cunningham Lake restoration, the Market Pointe shopping center in Papillion, the landscaping at Village Pointe and Omaha's combined sewer project.

The company currently has 65 employees in Omaha, up from 10 or 12 just three years ago. Instead of about 7,000 square feet at 72nd Street and Mercy Road, Olsson Associates will have 18,000 square feet at Aksarben Village, with an expansion option.

Strittmatter said the company was attracted to the development by its easy access to Kiewit Institute students and graduates, as well as "Noddle's willingness to be true to the concept of mixed-use development."

"The opportunity is so rare, especially in a setting we need to succeed," he said. "Really, it was the whole package."

DLR Group

The architecture-engineering-planning firm that is coordinating the various developers involved with bringing Aksarben Village to life is considering moving its own main office there.

"It's truly an exciting project and an intriguing possibility -- not only the possibility of doing our own building, but also doing it in connection with an urban redevelopment," said Ken West, director of DLR's Omaha office and project leader for Aksarben Village.

West said the firm likes the idea of being close to students at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, the Kiewit Institute and Scott Technology Center as well as the culture and environment that's going to be created by the project's mix of uses.

DLR, which now is in Regency, would plan about 32,000 square feet for its 110 Omaha employees, West said.

The employee-owned firm, formed in 1966 in Omaha, began its expansion when a desire to serve American Indian clients led to the purchase of a Phoenix firm, according to its Web site.

The company continued to grow through the acquisition of established firms, and today the DLR Group has offices in Des Moines; Portland, Ore.; Overland Park, Kan.; Philadelphia; Honolulu; Milwaukee; Chicago; Orlando, Fla.; Colorado Springs, Colo.; Sacramento, Calif.; Seattle; and Sioux Falls, S.D.

DLR was part of the Qwest Center Omaha team, and some of its current Omaha-area projects include the WallStreet Omaha and Tribedo condominium towers, north downtown's first two hotels and Gretna's newest elementary school.

The Aksarben project, West said, involves a lot of cooperation and collaboration to reach a common goal. "It's really exciting to see," he said.

University of Nebraska Foundation

The nonprofit organization that supports the university system's four campuses put together a site-selection committee more than a year ago to replace its outgrown space in Omaha.

"Aksarben is ideal for us," said Terry Fairfield, the foundation's chief executive officer. "Its proximity to both UNO and the medical center is better than now."

The foundation, now at 87th Street and West Dodge Road, will about double its Omaha office space to 17,000 square feet.

Fairfield said the foundation has 25 employees in Omaha, and a number of Lincoln employees also use Omaha office space. NU President J.B. Milliken has an office in Omaha, and the move will give the Omaha office conference space, Fairfield said.

The foundation has been actively acquiring property in the vicinity for UNO's future expansion, he said, and the business environment is attractive to foundation officials.

Fairfield also likes the idea of participating in the effort to revitalize midtown.

"I'm impressed with what Mutual of Omaha and the medical center have planned. All of these projects together -- the public private partnerships they involve -- create an exciting momentum for redeveloping that area."

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