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Three cities compete for STAR bonds

DAN J. SMITH, KEVIN SELERS
AND SARAH ST. JOHN

The race among three cities to use state-approved incentives to build a mid-size arena didn't appear to be getting any closer to a resolution this week.

Officials in Edwardsville, Olathe and Overland Park say they still maintain hopes of using sales tax and revenue (STAR) bonds to construct their respective projects, but none of the proposals seems to have gained significant traction at the state level.

Leaders in all three cities say it is likely the market will support only one arena, and Kansas Lt. Gov. John Moore and a state STAR bond evaluation committee that controls access to the special incentive will have the final say.

At stake is the board's permission to allow developers to use extra sales taxes generated by associated retail projects to fund an arena that could bring millions in additional sales tax and tourism dollars to whichever city ends up the big winner.

A look at where each of the projects stood Friday:

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Olathe residents could know within a month if a development team has identified adequate retail opportunities to finance an arena that effectively would put the race to locate the arena to bed.

Retail opportunities likely are the lynchpin in Olathe's entire proposal, which calls for \$273 million of development at a 103-acre site at 119th Street and Renner Road.

The leader of Olathe's efforts says that he is confident the plan has the potential to succeed, and that progress could be made within weeks.

Just last month, Olathe arena organizers seemed to be preparing to make a major announcement regarding the board's consideration of their first proposal.

Special sessions of the city's Planning Commission and City Council were scheduled, the project's area had been expanded, and officials said they were only waiting for approval from the state.

But on Aug. 6, Moore denied the group's STAR bond pitch, which included incentives for two tracts located a half mile apart. Moore said the plan didn't include adequate synergy between the properties.

The proposal called for an aquarium on a 40-acre



JAY SOLDNER/The Olathe News

Nellie Culter stood in a low spot in the kitchen floor, which slants away from the wall. Behind Culter is her refrigerator, which leans the other way. Culter claims the foundation her home is built on shifts often because of poor soil quality.

Residents tackle life near hazardous site

BY STEPHANIE CHEN

Special to The Olathe News

At the heart of Olathe lies the courthouse, City Hall, Fire and Police departments, county offices and a 1 1/2-acre property oozing with hazardous chemicals.

This EPA Superfund site and "ugly blight," as some nearby residents called it, is polluted with dangerous chemicals in the soil. For decades it has been a top concern for sur-

rounding homeowners.

The former chemical brokerage and recycling company Chemical Commodities, Inc. (CCI) failed to properly transport and dispose hazardous waste from 1951 to 1989. The company's negligence has taken time, money and tremendous effort from residents who live on Keeler, Ocheltree, Glendale and Parkway.

Living next to the hot spot for more than 50 years, Loula Park saw CCI's recklessness during

the company's operation.

"I'm just sick of it," Park said. "I have put up with it for so long. It's just been going on forever."

In what seems like an eternal battle for these residences, many have given up hope for hazard-free yards. Some have unsuccessfully tried to sell their homes, while others adapted to living with special ventilation systems in their homes and footing the extra electric bill costs out of their own pocket.

Residents learned to remove the contaminated soil and fill it with fresh soil to grow grass. Installing a fence to prevent the contaminated soil from seeping into their homes is just another precaution that many neighbors have taken.

Even after the Environmental Protection Agency announces a final cleanup solution, expected to be made in late September, these residents still will be liv-

LOCAL

Cleanup, real estate prices just two of residents' worries

From Page 1A
ing with the consequences of toxic chemicals and substances plaguing their neighborhood.

THE EPA: A MISSION TO EXCAVATE AND DISPOSE

The EPA has been involved with the site since the early 1980s. In 2000, it conducted soil test to determine the chemical levels of individual homes.

For the last four years, Mary Peterson, remedial project manager at the EPA, has been working closely with the site in remedial investigations and feasibility studies. Trichloreoethylene (TCE), a common industrial solvent for degreasing, was found in the groundwater, but the concentration was not high enough to cause physical harm.

"We found absolutely nothing dangerous to human health," she added.

Since the EPA's proposed a plan was approved in June, the agency is taking public suggestions until Sept. 15 to create a plan assessing the needs of both sides.

The outlined plan will excavate and dispose of the contaminated soil. This process takes only a few months, Peterson said.

Peterson said the real challenge will be treating the groundwater, which could take more than 50 years.

neighbors want the concentration brought down to 60 parts per million.

Trotter lives in the closest home to the site. Her worries extend beyond moving the cleanup process forward. She will have to deal with the digging and noise when the EPA begins.

Trotter knew about CCI when she bought her home in 1998. She said she thought the site was already cleaned up, but she noticed grass would not grow on the south side of her home.

Then a plumber came to her home one day and notified her of the unusual smell underground.

So Trotter bought new dirt and grass.

She didn't plant vegetables or fruit in her yard.

She tried to avoid looking at the site, but it's hard when you live right next door, she said

"I don't want to remember that the dumb thing is there every day," she said.

She said she once believed in achieving a solution by attending the advisory meetings, but the only outcome for Trotter has been frustration that nothing more can be done.

"When this all started, I was confident," she said. "But now I've lost all confidence in this mess."

THE REAL ESTATE FACTOR



Nellie Culter displayed a crack in the living room wall that she deduces is from various shifts in the foundation of her house because of the poor soil quality of the land under her home at 316 S. Keeler, directly west of the former site of Chemical Commodities, Inc.

The first change came with a vapor system installed in her bedroom.

When grass refused to grow because of the oil clumps in her soil, she spent hundreds of dollars on new soil and grass.

Her daughter rarely comes over because of the fumes.

"She complains about feeling sick for a couple of hours after she visits," Culter said. "I don't

"If it weren't dangerous, then why won't my house sell?" she asked.

FIRE, EXPLOSIONS AND GREEN SNOW

Park views selling her home pointless. She knows no one will buy her home knowing about the hazards.

care of like it should have been."

Explosions and fires were ordinary, Park said. She said the explosions most likely were a result of improper storage.

She remembers green snow one winter because of the chemicals. At one point, she said, the water was green with floating lumps of rust and

NEWS TO YOU

EPA preferred cleanup alternative:

- reduce contaminant mass in site soil
- prevent exposure to site soil
- control future site use
- minimize spread of contaminated groundwater
- reduce contaminant levels in groundwater
- control residential indoor air exposure
- prevent use of contaminated groundwater as a drinking water source.

random patches of grass and limbs left from the ice storm more than three years ago. Debris covers the property, which she has tried to clean up on her own.

"It's an ugly lot, and to see that day after day, year after year, and knowing that it is contaminated is very distressing," she said.

A resident since 1957, Divine saw the company before it was shut down, the demolition of the building and the barren and littered lot it has become.

Like Park, she recalls the fires. Divine said she once was evacuated from her home during the 1970s. The most surprising factor of these proliferating chemicals is the location in which it took place, she

groundwater, which could take more than 50 years.

There are also fumes from the chemicals underground that residents still will have to live with daily. The EPA and Boeing have paid for the installation and management of vapor systems in homes to dilute the nauseating chemical odors. About 29 homes have or will need the filtering system, said Glen Andrews, co-leader of the residents' advisory group, a team of neighbors lobbying for a cleanup solution.

The EPA's plan doesn't come cheap.

After spending millions of dollars on demolishing the site and on preliminary work, the plan will cost the federal agency an additional \$8 million.

IT'S JUST NOT ENOUGH

Resident Janet Trotter said she feels the EPA's proposal is not disposing of an adequate amount of dirt to eliminate the contamination. The EPA's cleanup plan calls for reducing the amount of hazardous chemicals like TCE to 1,000 parts per million. This would reduce the chemicals in half, Trotter said.

"So what good is that?" Trotter asked. "We want it brought down further."

She said she and many

THE REAL ESTATE FACTOR

"Would you want to buy my house?" asked resident Nellie Culter, who lives at 316 S. Keeler.

"The answer is no," she said. And "no" is answer Culter often hears from prospective buyers.

After putting her home on the market twice, buyers rejected her offer after finding out her home was near the old chemical plant. With a home labeled as a Superfund site, Culter said, selling it is only a wish that is unlikely to come true.

"A lady really wanted my home," she said. "They even put a deposit and went the whole nine yards, but then she just backed out. Who wants to live on a bunch of dangerous chemicals?"

Culter bought her home in 1997 without any idea of the toxic site. Like many of her neighbors, she has learned to live with the contamination.

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She complains about feeling sick for a couple of hours after she visits," Culter said. "I don't know if it's because of the chemicals or not, but it never happens when she goes anywhere else."

Now Culter is concerned about the cracks in her walls. She said she is sure it is a result of the chemicals in the groundwater.

Culter said she should be reimbursed for the extra costs by the companies involved and the EPA.

But the EPA tests reveal the opposite of many resident claims. Peterson explained that the contamination levels are not high enough to prevent grass growth. She supported her case with the studies and tests on the area, which conclude the site is not dangerous.

Despite the EPA's assertions, Culter still points out that her home will not sell.

She knows no one will buy her home knowing about the hazards.

Nestled in her house since 1962, she calls it home. But, she said, she never would have bought her home if she knew about the company's illegal actions.

Park endured the mess from the very beginning, and she said it saddens her to see so many paying for the irresponsibility of one company.

When CCI was in business, Park said, she always was suspicious that the company was not handling its hazardous substances properly.

She noticed the awful smell during the 1980s. She sent her complaints to the city, but said the city did little and ignored most of the problem.

"They (the city) laid icing on it," she said. "It wasn't taken

into account," she said, the water was green with floating lumps of rust and chemical discharge. The cement on her curbside was constructed to keep the groundwater from contaminating her property.

In the midst of the mess, Park said she appreciates the efforts of the EPA. Although the outcome may never be perfect, she is glad measures are being taken.

"We just don't want to be labeled a CCI area," she said.

NOT A PRETTY SIGHT

Across the street from the Divine residence is the Superfund site.

Today owner Jeanne Divine looks our her front door and sees a fence with a mass of overgrown trees and shrubs,

proliferating chemicals is the location in which it took place, she said.

"Olathe is a beautiful town, and we have something here that never should have happened," she said.

As one of the oldest residents in the area, Divine knows the end is nowhere near. She does thank the EPA, the advisory group and the city for their efforts in cleaning up.

Early this week, city officials announced they would help maintain the fenced area around the site. The area is dirty and covered in overgrown plants.

Although cleaning this federal site is not the city's responsibility, spokeswoman Alice Snider said the city wants to do everything it can to help the situation.

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