

THE TULSA

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Turkey Mountain // Photo by Michelle Pollard

Digging in

A closer look at the potential retail development near Turkey Mountain

by MOLLY BULLOCK

Casual observation of social media tells us many Tulsans shared a collective sigh of relief after the recent announcement that much of Turkey Mountain would remain undeveloped. The George Kaiser Family Foundation (GKFF) swooped in to relieve the shock that followed Simon Properties' earlier announcement of a potential outlet mall development near the mountain. Cries of "GKFF saves the day!" plastered social media. It's encouraging that GKFF would procure a large swath of the area for public use. But the conversation on the wildness of Turkey Mountain and the value of urban green space isn't finished.

Many questions remain: What is the status of the potential outlet mall on Turkey Mountain? Are the developers tuned into our community? What immediate environmental impacts would result from such a project?

What we know

City Councilor Jeannie Cue of District 2, which includes Turkey Mountain, said she's received a lot of inquiries, even from outside Oklahoma, about the proposed project. Those in favor and those opposed are pretty much split down the middle, Cue said. Like many Tulsans, Cue said she was

unclear about the details and unsure whether the project will even happen.

"A lot of people want more information before they even make a judgment," she said.

Robert Alexander – Simon's senior vice president of mall leasing and the person who made the initial announcement – said, "We have every intention of building the project, but we're not a hundred percent there yet.

"It's a little awkward, because we don't really disclose the status of our active deals until they're closed, and this deal's not closed, ..." Alexander said. "We're not ready to close on the land and break ground yet." Alexander was not familiar with Turkey Mountain or any controversy related to the project. He directed us to Simon spokesperson Les Morris.

Morris said he was familiar with the area – "Turkey Mountain? Turkey Hill?" – and the controversy. He said although the dissenters are determined, "there's obviously the silent majority ... of people who are really in support of this type of project in terms of economic benefit for the city. So I don't know that I would term it controversial, but yeah, I'm aware of what's going on."

Morris said it's too early to discuss the project at this point, but that in later stages, Simon

plans to engage the public and all stakeholders to make sure developments have adequate support.

"I don't think we meant [Alexander's announcement] to be interpreted as something that's definitely going to happen at a specific time in a specific location," Morris said. "I'm not saying it won't happen; I'm just saying it's too early at this point [to discuss it]."

When asked what strategies Simon uses to reduce the environmental impact of its developments, Morris said, "I think at this point I probably have gone as far as I can go. I don't feel comfortable talking any more about the property."

City public information officer Michelle Allen said on Sept. 2 that the city had "not received any plans – nothing to that effect – from this developer." Allen said any rezoning first goes through Tulsa Metropolitan Area Planning Commission, which includes county and city appointees and provides recommendations to the City Council, which will also review the plan and take public comments.

"So there are going to be two public processes for the public to voice any opinions they have," she said. Allen added that the city has received contact information from a group of interested citizens and will update them when more information becomes available.

Potential environmental impact

Eddie Reese, director of Oxley Nature Center, said the potential development would wipe out many smaller residents of the site, including hundreds of arthropod species, ornate turtles and three-toed box turtles, skinks, lizards and several species of snakes.

"All those things that live there now pretty much won't be able to leave," he said. "They're too small, too slow. So they're not going to make it."

Flying squirrels, which occupy Oxley Nature Center and Mohawk Park, might also reside in the Turkey Mountain area, Reese said. Unlike the more common fox squirrel, flying squirrels are nocturnal, which makes them particularly vulnerable to development.

"The bulldozers will come in during the daytime and start pushing things around, preparing the ground for development," Reese said. "... [Flying squirrels will] be holed up in a hollow tree, and they will get pushed over."

Larger animals like foxes, coyotes and bobcats would be forced into territory already occupied by their counterparts. The reduced hunting and nesting area would also squeeze out Red Tailed Hawks, Screech Owls and other birds.

"[A habitat] can only get so small before some animals have to

just leave the area completely,” Reese said. “I don’t know how small that really is for them.”

Jay Pruett, director of conservation for The Nature Conservancy in Oklahoma, said such a development would also disturb the surrounding wilderness. Unfamiliar disruptions like automobile noise and nighttime lighting “can make [animals] feel uncomfortable obtaining food or raising young ... such that they are not able to do it sufficiently,” Pruett said.

Some species, such as deer, opossums, skunks and raccoons, are relatively adaptable to such interference. Others leave the area in search of friendlier forests, Pruett said.

The details of any development are worth an earnest look because all life is connected, Reese said.

“I think sometimes people think that we don’t really need nature, because we’re separated from it,” Reese said. “... What they forget is that everything is tied together, and when you start taking pieces of that puzzle out, the puzzle starts to fall apart.”

The connections are intricate and hard to overstate. For example, hummingbirds build their nests with silk from spider webs, Reese said.

“If you don’t have spiders ... then hummingbirds won’t be making nests,” he said. “They won’t be laying eggs, and before too long, we won’t have any hummingbirds. ... Now, how many connections like that are there ... that we don’t know about? How is a turtle important; what is it connected to? ... How much can you afford to lose?”

Jeff Stava, director of Tulsa’s Gathering Place, LLC, and chief operating officer of the Tulsa Community Foundation, oversees real estate holdings for GKFF. Stava said the foundation hopes to work with adjacent landowners – including, potentially, Simon – as needed to minimize effects of development. Stava said he thinks the environmental impacts of an outlet mall would be insubstantial considering Turkey Mountain’s surroundings. (A dozen or more businesses, including industrial sites, already about Turkey Mountain.)

“There’s a major highway that’s just right there, so the impacts (of an outlet mall), I think, would be negligible,” he said.

Shrinking boundaries

Pruett said the potential development would infringe on an already-limited wild space and pave the way for more commercial projects.

Mountain biker LaDonna Baroni illustrated this point with the example of Tulsa Hills Shopping Center, a nearby development that’s brought increased traffic and road build-outs to the area around Turkey Mountain. Baroni is a member of Team LUNA Chix, a sponsored women’s mountain biking team that regularly uses the trail system on and near Turkey Mountain for biking, hiking and trail running.

“Everybody likes to say that [the proposed mall is] not going to impact Turkey Mountain, but it absolutely will,” Baroni said. “We’re already closing in on that piece of property, and if it’s built up all the way around, we lose

some of that privacy. You just hate to see something that is considered a wilderness area being encroached on, and it seems like it’s just a matter of time [before more land in the area is sold and developed].”

Why here?

In addition to the Simon prospect, the developers of The Outlet Shoppes at Oklahoma City have announced plans for a mall in east Tulsa. Both Baroni and Reese suggested that instead of clearing green space, developers repurpose existing sites that have fallen into disrepair.

“There’s enough property all over Tulsa – even abandoned properties – that could be utilized,” Baroni said.

“Why destroy something that we already hold precious, instead of ... taking something else that’s not worth anything and making it better?” Reese said. “We’re rotting from the inside; why don’t we fix the rot on the inside before we build more on the outside?”

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