

Outdoor sports venue planned at former Celanese site

Expanded venue to include cycling, climbing, inline skating

By Matt Garfield · 2008 The Herald

Updated 12/10/08 - 7:09 AM |

A bicycle racing track first pitched four years ago in Rock Hill has been recast as part of a larger sports venue planned at the former Celanese site.

The 250-acre venue, dubbed the Cycling and Outdoor Center of the Carolinas, would include a track as well as a mountain bike course, climbing wall, inline skating park and sports fields for baseball, softball and other sports. The outdoor track, known as a velodrome, still would be a focal point.

The new plan has earned praise from Mayor Doug Echols, who says the wider range of offerings should appeal to a bigger audience than just cyclists. Echols and the City Council soon will consider committing money to help build the complex.

"We're expanding the whole concept for multiple levels and abilities," Echols said. "These will be general public areas, versus before where we were primarily focused on the velodrome."

Organizers are targeting a location at the former Celanese Celriver Plant off Cherry Road near the Catawba River, where plans for a massive redevelopment called Riverwalk would bring shops, homes and a business park.

The developers have agreed to set aside land near the river for free, saying the track and other outdoor attractions would fit nicely with their plans.

Supporters say the timing is right for a cycling center to become the city's next amateur sports venue, joining the Manchester Meadows soccer complex, Cherry Park's softball fields and the Rock Hill Tennis Center. They mention the growing popularity of cycling and point out that no other velodromes operate in the region.

"You would have a venue that would appeal to anyone who rides a bike," said Mike Burgess, a member of the Rock Hill Bicycle Club. "Then it becomes a hub of activity where all of a sport can participate. One plays off the other."

A group of Rock Hill officials traveled to Florida in September to watch a velodrome event at a multi-sport park.

Still at issue is the amount of tax dollars that ought to be spent. The \$4 million construction cost would come mostly from hospitality taxes and grants controlled by the city. A group of cycling buffs on the Carolina Velodrome Association pledged \$500,000 to go along with the donated land, valued at \$600,000.

The groups could reach a deal to lock up the necessary land in the first part of next year. Then they must figure out how to divide the costs of construction, which likely wouldn't start until 2010.

"I had a lot of concerns about it being such a niche venue," said Echols, describing earlier skepticism. "(Now) I think it has real possibilities. It adds to our place in the market as a sports tourism community."

A cycling group wants more attractions at a center planned in Rock Hill. Among their ideas:

The latest plan
&#8226; Cycling uses
Velodrome, a 250-meter paved oval track
Paved road course
BMX course
Mountain bike trail
&#8226; Sports uses
Softball, baseball and multipurpose fields
&#8226; Outdoor recreation uses
Climbing wall
Inline skating
Hiking trails

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