

Bass Pro leaves KC Downtown with empty line

By Jim Davis. Kansas City Business Journal: May 30, 2003.

Kansas City leaders are trolling for other tenants after failing to hook Bass Pro Shops for a proposed downtown entertainment district.

The expedition probably will be protracted because no prospects are imminent.

Andi Udris, CEO of the Economic Development Corp. of Kansas City, said Bass Pro officials have told him they won't build Downtown.

Luring Bass Pro to Downtown was a long shot from the start, Udris said. The retailer prefers suburban locations because it is cheaper to clear surface parking lots for customers than to build parking garages Downtown.

Larry Whitely, a spokesman at Bass Pro's headquarters in Springfield, Mo., said the company has signed no contract for a Kansas City-area store and set no timetable for a decision. The outdoor gear outfitter's officials began eyeing Kansas City three years ago and are being courted on both sides of the state line.

Losing Bass Pro would be just the latest blow to downtown boosters, already reeling after the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City spurned pleadings to move its headquarters to the east side of Illus W. Davis Park from 925 Grand Blvd. If the bank's recommendation is endorsed in June by the Fed's board in Washington, it would occupy the former Trinity Lutheran Hospital site south of Penn Valley Park.

Bass Pro's decision to rule out Downtown could prove even more devastating if it cripples efforts to energize an area whose fortunes began dimming decades before the Power & Light District's plug was pulled two years ago. Although some downtown leaders questioned whether Bass Pro's customers would patronize Downtown's existing and planned attractions, no other candidates have surfaced.

Udris said plans will need at least several more months to coalesce.

The Cordish Co. of Baltimore, which the EDC recruited in April to land Bass Pro and other companies, continues to market the new entertainment district. Cordish's role, however, has diminished, Udris said.

Rather than directing development, Udris said, Cordish will answer to the Greater Downtown Development Authority, which Kansas City Mayor Kay Barnes established almost two years ago. The authority's clout increased this month when the General Assembly passed the Missouri Downtown Economic Stimulus Act.

The authority will advise the City Council on how to spend state taxes captured by the act.

Kansas City Councilman Troy Nash said he's not sure what the authority will do.

"How do you introduce a new entity into an established structure?" said Nash, who is chairman of the City Council's Planning, Zoning and Economic Development Committee. "Nobody has a clear idea."

Nash said his uncertainty is heightened because the authority shares some members with the EDC. It's possible, he said, that the authority will take responsibility for building downtown business while the EDC will concentrate on other parts of Kansas City.

Cordish officials could not be reached.

Barnes said she hasn't given up on bringing Bass Pro to Downtown. But Barnes expected to meet on May 29 with the new owner of Bannister Mall, where Bass Pro initially had wanted to open a store.

Stanley Spigel, the Texas-based turnaround specialist who bought the long-struggling south Kansas City mall in April, said he met with Bass Pro officials at the International Council of Shopping Centers convention May 18-21 in Las Vegas.

An existing tax increment financing plan could provide an edge for Bannister, Spigel said. He has talked with potential joint venture partners to snare Bass Pro, he said.

Still to be resolved is the fate of a Jones Store Co. at the mall. The store's owner, St. Louis-based May Department Stores Co., last year blocked efforts to bring Bass Pro to Bannister when it reneged on plans to move and build a new store at the mall.

May officials could not be reached for comment this week.

Kansas City Councilman Chuck Eddy, who represents the Bannister area and convened the May 29 meeting with Spigel, said he hopes May will help bring Bass Pro to Bannister. Eddy said the department store operator's executives agreed to keep an open mind in return for the General Assembly's passage of an August sales tax holiday.

Joe Serviss, Barnes' chief of staff, said the mayor is pushing multiple locations for Bass Pro in Kansas City because she wants to give the company choices and make sure it doesn't go to Independence or Olathe. "Bass Pro will make its own decision," Serviss said. "We don't make the choice. They do."