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Project in works for land owned by airport

By **Kevin Rademacher**

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Plans are in the works to convert a conspicuously idle 44 acres at the northwest corner of Tropicana Avenue and Paradise Road into a nearly 1 million-square-foot office-and-retail project.

The project -- dubbed East Village -- is being spearheaded by the Las Vegas company Eighth Wonder, which also is vying for a gaming and resort license in Singapore.

Eighth Wonder and its principals -- Mark Advent, Mark Vlassopoulos and Stephen Chen -- are the majority stockholders in East Village Partners.

Advent and Vlassopoulos said the \$225 million East Village project will be designed to attract both tourists and local customers.

The company currently has a \$25 million bridge loan from California-based Canyon Capital Realty Advisors to cover the \$18 million acquisition of ILX Resorts Inc.'s 50-year land lease on the property, which is owned by McCarran International Airport.

The loan also will cover predevelopment costs, which will include a detailed design and preleasing efforts, Vlassopoulos said.

Advent said talks are currently under way to secure construction financing.

"For too many years, I think everybody has felt that this was too key a piece of property to do nothing," Vlassopoulos said. "We need to do something iconic."



Mark Vlassopoulos, left, and Mark Advent, principals in the East Village Las Vegas project, stand on a 44-acre parcel east of the Strip Thursday. The \$225 million retail-and-office development is scheduled to break ground in the first quarter of 2006 and be completed in mid-2007. (Photo by Steve Marcus/Las Vegas Sun)

The project is slated for 250,000 square feet of office space and about 700,000 square feet of retail, entertainment and banquet and meeting space, said Advent, who designed the New York-New York hotel-casino.

"I think I know a little bit about creating high-energy experiences," Advent said. "We are in a several-mile radius of tens of thousands of hotel rooms and condo units ... At the same time we have a high sensitivity to the local market as well."

Among the main features of the project is a roughly 100,000-square-foot enclosed entertainment district, Advent said.

Vlassopoulos said the project is currently scheduled to break ground in the first quarter of 2006 and open as soon as mid-2007.

Advent said East Village will attract tourists looking for something different, which they will find in the street scene designed to resemble New York's East Village.

"The hotel-casino experience is basically all more of the same," he said.

Vlassopoulos agreed.

"So much of Vegas appears different, but it is the same just repackaged in different components," he said. "The experience can become a little bit repetitive."

Advent conceded that competing with the likes of the Forum Shops at Caesars Palace or the Grand Canal Shoppes at the Venetian would be difficult. Still, he said tourists would seek out something new, especially in a location Advent sees as highly visible.

"A lot of guests that come back to Vegas are repeat customers," he said.

In addition, Advent said the developers plan to work with McCarran International Airport to have East Village designated as an alternative check-in point, where airport passengers could check bags and receive boarding passes.

A McCarran spokeswoman said that the airport plans to launch a pilot program for alternative check in points in October. At this point, those plans only include a handful of Strip hotels.

For locals, Advent said East Village will position itself as a high-energy spot for shopping, dining and entertainment without the hassles of Las Vegas Boulevard.

"The majority of locals do not want, on a regular basis, the Strip experience," he said.

Bobby Turner, managing partner of Canyon Capital, said the creativity of the developers made the project an attractive development, despite the retail competition on the Strip.

"They are smart developers," Turner said. "They are not going to assume that people will come just because you build it."

One local retail expert said the project's success will hinge on creating a compelling destination capable of pulling visitors off the Strip and luring residents out of their suburban neighborhoods.

"I just don't know," said George Connor, a Strip retail specialist for Colliers International. "You've got to give them a reason to stop."

Still he said he wanted to see more specific plans before chiming in on the project's potential for success or failure.

"I think it's still a little bit too early to tell," Connor said.

In terms of tenants, Vlassopoulos said there will be no anchor tenants. Instead the developers are opting for smaller specialty retail, dining and entertainment venues.

"There will be no single anchor tenant in a classic retail mall sense," he said, adding that tenants, like customers, will be drawn to something new. "We believe we offer a great alternative to those retailers."

The East Village project will include the demolition of the Greens of Las Vegas, an 18-hole natural grass putting course, pro shop and bar on a 23-acre site. The failed project opened in July 2003 and closed about five months later.