

SITLA continues search for USU-area developer

Rudy Herndon Moab Sun News | Posted: Thursday, October 11, 2018 8:34 am

The “Help Wanted” sign is back up at the state office that’s overseeing plans for a mixed-use residential development around the future Utah State University-Moab campus.

Utah’s School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration (SITLA) previously issued a “Request for Qualifications” from master developers who would be interested in bringing the trust’s vision for the area to life. But the administration’s Aug. 31 deadline came and went with no responses that matched that vision for a mixed-use, multi-family and student housing development, and now, SITLA is revisiting the proposal.

“We didn’t get the interest we were hoping (for),” SITLA Project Manager Troy Herold told the Moab City Council during its regular meeting on Tuesday, Oct. 9. “I know that’s not necessarily from the need – I know there’s a need, but unfortunately, the couple responses we did get, we didn’t feel were necessarily the right developer.”

Herold said his agency believes strongly in the project’s land-use plan that it developed in part with the city and USU-Moab. It also stands by a 2012 pre-annexation agreement for the area, which spans more than 320 acres of SITLA-owned land surrounding the future campus site just west of the U.S. Highway 191-Mill Creek Drive intersection.

“Our intent is to follow that land-use plan, and follow the pre-annexation agreement,” he said. “Whichever developer we choose in the future to partner with will have to come before the planning commission and city council, and prove that their more detailed plans comply with that overall land-use plan and are going to be a good fit for the community.”

Along those lines, he said, SITLA’s initial planning documents make it clear to developers that they would be building a project for the community that meets all of the administration’s goals.

“And I think those responses we got were wanting to try and take the plan somewhere else,” he said.

According to SITLA documents, the agency had anticipated that it would wrap up a development lease,



Troy Herold

SITLA Project Manager Troy Herold (front, center) updated the Moab City Council on the trust’s plans for a mixed-use residential development as USU-Moab Executive Director Lianna Etchberger listened. [Photo by Rudy Herndon / Moab Sun News]

development agreement or a purchase agreement with a selected developer in late 2018. At the time that it issued its Request for Qualifications, SITLA expected that the developer would be able to begin work on the project in early 2019.

Herold speculated that the lukewarm response to his agency's initial proposal could be tied to broader development trends, as developers pursue large-scale projects elsewhere in Utah. However, he said he's certain that SITLA can find the right developer for the USU-Moab-area project if it narrows its focus and spends more time working with the university and the city to plan ahead.

"Unfortunately, we're not there today, but I'm confident we would get there," he said.

At some point, he said, the agency may look at developing the project on its own, in smaller segments.

"If it makes more sense for the community ... rather than have one large, big development, we would do it in small bites," Herold said. "I think it responds to the university's needs more and the community's needs more."

Moab City Manager David Everitt said the city's 2012 master plan and subsequent update include "pretty direct" language about future land uses in the overall planning area. Specifically, those uses include student housing, family residential housing and single-family residential housing, as well as transitional land uses for areas that are directly adjacent to U.S. Highway 191 and two nearby intersections.

Herold said the transitional area could accommodate retail uses, as opposed to residential development.

"I'm just throwing out ideas, but sometimes, (it includes) a commercial use: coffee shop, cafes, restaurants," he said. "It could be a potential for a hotel-type complex if the need arose. I don't think that's the case in Moab, but those were ideas that (came up) at the time, and we would still look to comply with that land-use plan today."

Moab Mayor Emily Niehaus, who noted that state code exempts SITLA from local municipalities' land-use zoning requirements, praised Herold's stated commitment to that existing land-use plan and pre-annexation agreement. That commitment, she said, gives the council and the community "a lot of assurance."

"It's really nice to sit down with you here and just reaffirm that we have the annexation agreement," she said.

Campus development set to begin in 2020

Citing USU-Moab documents, Everitt said that construction work on the first phase of the new campus is currently scheduled to begin in 2020.

“(It’s) not that far away at all, actually,” he said.

That development timeline has changed largely because university officials have scaled back their previous \$10 million plans for the first phase of a new campus.

In the past, they had been seeking \$5 million in community contributions for the new campus. But in order to get things off the ground sooner rather than later, they recently pared that goal down to \$2 million.

“We’re just trying to make sure that we can move forward,” USU-Moab Executive Director Lianna Etchberger said. “Our goals and our intentions are always the same. We just wanted to move forward, so the proposal is slightly smaller.”

Herold said he views the scaled-back goal as a positive step toward developing the first phase of the campus.

“It’s less of an initial commitment that’s going to be required in order to spur the campus going forward,” he said.

He said he would hope that people in the community share his opinion.

“I don’t think it’s changing the overall scope of the campus or the overall plan of the campus,” Herold said. “It’s just maybe phase one is reduced in order to (get the project) started today.”

Niehaus said the revised fundraising goal spurred helpful discussion in the community.

“That caused a lot of what I like to call creative tension in our community, where we’re saying ... ‘Do we want this whole phase and where are we, and where can we find ourselves moving forward?’ and it really allowed us to hear from different members in the community – their feelings about what has been phase one, and that’s always a good thing: to know what people’s expectations are,” she said.