

## Heartland Events Center

Fund raising under way for 'most important project' in G.I.'s history

By Carol Bryant

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Completing the Heartland Events Center is a monumental project that will have major effects on Central Nebraska.

"I think this is the most important project in the history of Grand Island," said Brian Hamilton, Heartland Events Center president.

Since a campaign for major gifts began in July, \$660,000 has been raised, said Hugh Miner, executive vice president of Fonner Park, where the events center will be constructed. To date, \$4.7 million has been collected, including two \$1 million gifts from Fred and Maxine Bosselman and the Reynolds Foundation.

"In the next five to 10 months, we need to raise a minimum of \$10 million," Miner said.

Once that level has been reached, a campaign targeting the general public will begin, and foundations will be approached to raise another \$10 million.

Larger foundations are waiting for residents to make donations before they consider contributing.

"They've said, 'Until we see more community support, we're not going to get involved,'" Miner said.

Total value of the Heartland Events Center is \$35 million, which includes:

Building cost, \$21.4 million.

Equipment cost, \$2.6 million.

Costs such as architectural and management fees, \$1 million.

Additional contribution, \$10 million from Fonner Park in-kind contributions.

The Heartland Events Center's 113,200-square-foot arena will seat up to 7,500 people. The projected starting date for construction is fall 2002, and construction will take 18 to 20 months to complete, Miner said. Factors such as weather and availability of materials could affect the time length for construction.

The center will be able to host sporting events, conventions, concerts, performing arts groups, banquets and trade shows. Available space in the existing Fonner Park grandstand will minimize new construction expenses. The cost to duplicate portions of the existing lobby area, grandstand, land, parking and other areas that the events center will have access to represents an in-kind savings of \$10 million to the project, Miner said.

The Leo A Daly firm has prepared schematic drawings of the Heartland Events Center. A \$50,000 grant from the Grand Island Area Economic Development Corp. and a \$200,000 grant from the Grand Island Community Redevelopment Authority made it possible to hire Daly, Miner said.

"That's a nationally recognized architectural firm. That assures us the design work is going to be good," Miner said. "We've done a letter of intent with Kiewit Construction. They're going to manage the project. All of our local contractors will be able to submit bids. It's going to be easier to sell to large foundations because of the quality of the contractor and architectural firm."

Kiewit Construction has a design-assist program.

"They take the schematic drawings and estimate what it's going to cost to build the project," Miner said.

Kiewit Construction was doing work on Omaha's convention center at the same time it was working on the Heartland Events Center.

He recalled that, during fund-raising efforts for College Park, 70 percent of the \$4.8 million cost was raised before a general campaign was conducted. College Park had been the largest private fund-raising project in Grand Island before work on the events center started.

Approximately 30 volunteers have been working since July, making contacts for large gifts.

"We had to start someplace and put a core group together," Miner said.

"Doyle Hulme is a tremendous asset as one of the co-chairs for the campaign. We don't have another co-chair. We know that someone's going to step forward and have a burning desire to see this go forward.

"What we're going to be focusing on in the next five to 10 months is major gifts. Hopefully, we will have documented there's good community support. We need to have the funds committed prior to construction. The large gifts are important. Grand Island has had a great history of giving. It's a regional project."

The events center has received \$300,000 from the Hall County Agricultural Society and \$250,000 from the Principal Financial Group Foundation.

People in Grand Island have to drive 90 miles to Lincoln or 150 miles to Omaha to attend concerts and other events. The Heartland Events Center will attract people from western Nebraska, southern South Dakota, northern Kansas and eastern Nebraska, Miner said. He estimates the project will serve a population base of 500,000 people.

"The faster we can raise the money, the better off we'll be," Miner said.

Ideally, construction would begin no later than fall 2002.

"It will take three years beyond construction to have it at its full potential," he said.

Planning for the Heartland Events Center started before the Tri-City Arena was constructed.

"We'll be able to offer the same things they do and more," Miner said of the Kearney arena.

Access to the Heartland Events Center is a plus. The site will be reached through the Interstate 80/South Locust interchange, Highway 30, Highway 34 and Stuhr Road.

"That's been one of our strong points for many years," Miner said. "It will be easy to find the facility."

The first employee hired for the events center will be a marketing director, he said.

"At the present time, we're using existing (Fonner Park) staff to provide support to volunteers. We'll work with a consulting firm that specializes in event centers to help develop an organizational chart.

"The key to the success of it is to keep it busy," Miner said. "The object is to make it cash flow. That's more likely to happen today because most event centers have tenants," usually professional sports teams. Because conventions and trade shows like to rotate their locations, "you can't count on them coming back on an annual basis."

"Fonner Park in its 48-year history has actually been a civic center. By providing existing staff for this project, it will reduce costs and provide support to this facility."

Both Fonner Park and the Heartland Events Center are nonprofit public-service corporations.

"It's an exciting project. It's a project that this community has wanted. It's something that will greatly enhance the quality of life in this area. I think it could attract more industry to locate here. The main thing now is to focus on securing the necessary funding."

Work on the Heartland Events Center has proceeded in phases. The events center obtained 501(c)3 status from the IRS in March so it could accept charitable contributions. In May, the Grand Island City Council approved a 2 percent occupation tax on hotels and motels. The tax, which should raise \$200,000 a year, will be used for marketing the center and covering any operating shortfall.

#### Heartland Vision

Development of an events center was selected as the top goal during Heartland Vision. Hulme was chairman of Heartland Vision, a 1997 effort to identify priorities in Central Nebraska.

Heartland Vision "was one of the reasons I offered to help with this campaign," Hulme said. "It tied into Heartland Vision. This was the one thing we could do to influence the future of the area as much as anything."

Heartland Vision sought ideas for the future of communities in Hall County as well as Phillips, Chapman, St. Libory and Doniphan. Then, more than 500 people selected their priorities April 5 and 6, 1997, at the Conestoga Mall. People were given "Vision Bucks" to vote for their priorities. Each person received 10 votes in the form of \$5,000 bills and one \$10,000 vote. The civic center received 420 \$5,000 votes and 37 \$10,000 votes. Total vote value for the civic center was almost \$2.5 million, about \$1 million more than the second place.

In addition to topping the Heartland Vision list in 1997, motel owners asked Fonner Park in the fall of 1997 to work with them and area leaders to develop an events center.

Hulme was plant manager at New Holland in Grand Island, now known as CNH, from 1980 to 1996.

"In times past, we have wanted to put on some comparative displays for customers that came to the plant," he said. "We were unable to find a facility large enough to house four combines to do comparative walk-arounds."

The Heartland Events Center would offer such space. Hulme said the events center could be used for graduations, such as Grand Island Senior High's.

He discussed challenges they're facing in raising money for the events center.

"There's a lot of fund-raising events in the community," Hulme said.

"When we get a chance to open it up for the general campaign, we want to ballyhoo a lot of things. The support we've gotten from Fonner Park is great. When we ring the bell, we'll ask for help from everybody," Hulme said.

#### Raising funds

Hamilton has been working with Hulme in raising money for the events center.

"Our plan is to raise 60 percent of the money before we start a general campaign to the public," Hamilton said. "We have a core group of 30 volunteers who are going out and making one-on-one calls. Most of the larger foundations have said they will seriously look at this project once we show more local support. We hope to have all the major donors contacted by Oct. 1."

If an entity is willing to donate \$4 million or \$5 million to the center, it could get the right to name the center.

"That would be a large foundation or a large donor wanting to leave a legacy," Hamilton said. "We did not hire a professional fund-raiser. We wanted all the money raised to go toward the project."

"Look at the success Fonner Park is today," Hamilton said. Fonner Park is not in debt and makes money.

"This facility can be equally as successful for the enjoyment of everyone in Central Nebraska," Hamilton said. "It's a reason for people to turn off the interstate and stop. If we can get it built, in five to 10 years we'll be adding on to it. If this is built, there'll be more motels and restaurants built around it because of the need. It ties into the new interchange and the beautification of South Locust. It lends itself to Husker Harvest Days."

Hamilton is familiar with another events center, the Salina, Kan., Bicentennial Center, because his parents have lived in Salina.

"The biggest challenge is the farm economy has slowed," Hamilton said about fund raising. However, he feels the economy is rebounding, as evidenced through lower gas prices and tax rebate checks.

Another challenge is overcoming two unfavorable elections for a civic center. The November 1989 and December 1995 votes showed that the events center had to be built with private money. Hamilton noted that the first two elections for the Salina Bicentennial Center were unsuccessful, but voters approved the center in the third election.

"We're hoping the third time is a charm," Hamilton said. "Our attitude is it's going to happen. If it takes five years to raise the money, we're going to do it."

#### Economic impact

Monty Montgomery, president of the Grand Island Area Economic Development Corp., said the Heartland Events Center is "going to have a very positive effect on what we're doing. It shows that Grand Island's moving forward. We're not remaining static. It's going to bring some entertainment options to Grand Island that don't exist today."

The Texas native referred to examples of civic centers that have had positive effects in the Lone Star State. The first is the Taylor County Coliseum and Exposition Center in Abilene.

"I can't think of a weekend when they aren't having a function," Montgomery said.

The Abilene center's specialty is hosting rodeo competitions.

Stephenville, Texas, where Montgomery's grandparents live, does not have a civic center. The town's population is approximately 20,000, and it has a state university there. Glen Rose, which is 30 miles east of Stephenville, built an equestrian civic center. Stephenville gets a ripple effect from Glen Rose's civic center.

"I believe Glen Rose has activities going on every weekend. These facilities are being utilized virtually every day of the year," Montgomery said.

He talked about the economic impact the events center will have on the community.

"If a person spends \$1 in Grand Island, it will turn over seven times in the community," Montgomery said. The money might be used to purchase gas, a restaurant meal, a night's stay in a hotel, clothing or groceries.

Grand Island has been "compared to a community in the area and how we lag behind them. This is going to provide us a chance to lay our money on the table and prove this is something we need to do. We can talk about it all we want to. It's time to step up. We need everyone in the community to step up and support this. It's going to affect every socioeconomic group in town."

Expand existing events

Eve 6's Aug. 8 concert at Fonner Park is an example of the types of events that the center will attract, said Roger Nygaard, Grand Island Area Chamber of Commerce president. The events center will enable Grand Island to attract larger conventions and to expand existing events such as Husker Harvest Days and the Hall County Fair.

"It will grow these shows to a different level," Nygaard said. "Fonner does a great job now. To have a state-of-the-art facility with quality equipment, I think that will be a real plus."

Raising money to construct the Heartland Events Center is a challenge, Nygaard said.

"Good things aren't easy to come by. We have to work on it. The Fonner Park board and Hugh Miner have dedicated a lot of time to that. They'll leave no stone unturned in terms of potential funding. I'm just so optimistic on that type of event center. It's a matter of competing in the region."