



April 25, 2009

## Swim complex in the works for Cape Coral

Sport's premier events would be held in city

*By Tom Hayden  
thayden@news-press.com*

The governing body of swimming in the United States is proposing a \$35 million swimming complex and wellness center, along with a hotel/convention facility valued at about \$250 million, for Cape Coral.

The official proposal probably will be made to the city by the end of next week, said John McIlhargy, facilities project development director for the swim group.

A deal could bring major events and millions of dollars to Cape Coral.

The National Swim Center Corporation, supported by USA Swimming, is interested in building what it calls "a premier complex" on a site in the northeastern part of the city known as the Academic Village.

"I am comfortable we can do this on the site, and I think the city is very receptive in working with us," McIlhargy said.

The 183-acre site is at the northwest corner of Kismet Parkway and the Del Prado Boulevard extension.

Other phases of the project could include two more hotels, a USTA tennis center, shops, restaurants and a business park for a branch college campus.

"I believe Lee County has tremendous things to offer with the beaches ... and Cape Coral," said McIlhargy, who added the Lee County Sports Authority's involvement will be crucial to the project's success.

If a feasibility study indicates the site is right for the facility and all parties come to terms, McIlhargy hopes to have the swimming complex built by 2013.

The project could bring in \$35 million annually in economic impact generated by 67,000 hotel room nights, restaurant spending and more than \$1.5 million from bed and state sales tax, according to the National Swim Center Corporation, the nonprofit building arm of USA Swimming.

"Every indication is this has excellent opportunity for success," Cape Coral City Manager Terry Stewart said.

A similar USA Swimming complex was discussed by those proposing sites for the new Boston Red Sox facility. But Lee County Commissioner Tammy Hall said that was nothing more than talk.

"It was never part of the Red Sox proposal," she said. "There was never anything put together formally."

Cape Coral was concerned the swim group might be using discussions with the Cape as a bargaining chip to claim space at the Red Sox site.

"We didn't want to be part of something like that," Stewart said.

One of the developers involved in the Red Sox proposals, Edison Farms, did make a complex part of the bid package after early discussions with the swim group.

"USA Swimming has historically been looking for a site in Lee County," said spokeswoman Heather Mikes. "We thought we could work together with them."

Now, McIlhargy said his group is working only with Cape Coral.

Councilwoman Dolores Bertoloni, who has been the point person on council for many of the discussions and tours over the last 60 days, says the proposal fits with the property's original plans.

"When the Academic Village was originally proposed, it was to bring in a learning institution," she said. "This has the same potential to bring in education facilities, swim teams, tennis teams, local and national events. This has a great deal of potential.

"They see our city as young and inviting."

## The facility

The swimming complex would include two 50-meter pools, a diving well and seating for 5,800 with room to expand to 10,000.

McIlhargy said the complex would be used mainly for state, regional and national events.

The complex could also host the NCAA championships, FHSAA state championships and possibly the Olympic Trials, which take place once every four years.

"I see the U.S. Open, masters swimming and diving events and a seven-day-a week community wellness center where people can learn to swim," McIlhargy said.

Added Steve Pohlman, director of Cape Coral Parks and Recreation: "The size of this venue far exceeds anything else in our community," Pohlman said.

## Paying for it

Paying for the project will take negotiations.

McIlhargy hopes the city will donate the land - originally purchased for approximately \$7 million - or at least a portion of it, with the rest under a long-term lease. He will ask the city to pay for half of the \$100,000 master plan study, which he said could be completed in 120 days.

Endowment money raised through the nonprofit corporation will pay for most of the construction as well as the \$1.2 million annual operating expenses. He will ask the city and Lee County for economic development assistance.

"Let's see what they come up with on their (proposal)," Bertolini said. "Nothing is for free. We will see what kind of investment we have to make."

McIlhargy says he does not "want anything from the taxpayer."

He also said he believes the project will bring hundreds of jobs to the area as well as build a stronger tax base.

"And the Lee County Sports Authority is crucial to help market this," he said.

Jeff Mielke of Sports Authority said the project is an incredible opportunity for the city and the surrounding area.

"It elevates any region being able to host national international events of Olympic caliber," he said. "We have already committed to a significant role in bringing events to the facility which will take an investment from the county as far as host fees."

## Concerns

The site does present some concerns for the swim group. Construction will not be allowed on pockets of environmentally sensitive land within the property. That could affect completing all the projects.

Swimming officials are satisfied with the road network and the trip to Southwest International Airport.

"In any primary metropolitan area, 30 to 35 minutes is quite reasonable," Stewart said.

---