



Bass Pro Shops will Join MOA

Sporting goods giant offers Phase II anchor

Bloomington Sun-Current

By Harvey T. Rockwood

November 30, 2006

Missouri-based Bass Pro Shops will be an anchor tenant with an "outdoor superstore" in the new 5.6 million-square-foot Phase II expansion planned at the Mall of America in Bloomington.

In addition, mall officials unveiled plans Monday for a 202-room hotel and a 6,000-seat performing arts venue. Several other attractions, including a roller coaster and a "first-of-its-kind" Mexican restaurant, are planned for the existing portion of the mall. But by far the biggest addition will be the sporting goods giant, which will occupy about 300,000 square feet of the new addition, mall operators said Monday afternoon. Bass Pro Shop's headquarters is Missouri's most popular tourist destination.

The company's stores typically include wildlife dioramas, murals and chandeliers depicting outdoor scenes, massive log and rock work, water features, and aquariums stocked with native fish species, a company spokesman said. The megamall store will have a boat sales showroom. The store may also include a restaurant.

"Bass Pro is in the midst of a rapid expansion," said Larry Whiteley, the company's corporate public relations manager. The company plans to add six new stores this year. "The stores typically range in size from 150,000 to 200,000 square feet," Whiteley said. The flagship store, in Springfield, Mo., includes about 330,000 square feet.

Phase II will be built to the north of the present mall on roughly 42 acres that includes the former site of the Met Sports Center. The new addition is also expected to include a 6,000-seat performing arts venue. It will be operated by AEG Worldwide, which owns Staples Center in Los Angeles and other sports and entertainment venues. AEG also owns several sports franchises, including the Los Angeles Lakers.

Dana Warg, AEG's senior vice president for facilities, said most performing artists prefer bookings at sites with 4,000 to 6,000 seats. He said the Mall of America theater could host musical performances, comedy and awards presentation programs. "This is a perfect venue," Warg said. Warg declined to say how much the theater might cost but did say performing arts centers of similar size elsewhere have cost anywhere from \$50 million to \$150 million. He said the center could expect to have at least 125 dates with major entertainment attractions each year.

The mall operators rolled out several new elements expected to become part of Phase II, as well as several improvements designed to revitalize the existing mall. For example, the Park at the Mall of America - the park formerly known as Camp Snoopy - will get its first "thrill coaster," a roller coaster designed to send adults' pulse-pounding. It will include a loop and an upside-down segment, found on neither of the two mall roller coasters. And the fourth-floor space that once was the scene of bustling night clubs will be home to a "first-of-its-kind" Mexican restaurant, the Cantina No. 1 Corona, by the maker of Corona beer. The restaurant and bar will occupy space overlooking the amusement park that was formerly occupied by Knuckleheads comedy club and Fat Tuesday. Cantina will feature regional specialty beers from Mexico matched with traditional regional dishes. "It will occupy 13,000 square feet and offer live entertainment and salsa dance lessons," said David Solner, a principal with the Cunningham Group, a partner in the operation. He said the Mall of America is considered a great place to roll out new concepts such as the Cantina.

"This is just the tip of the iceberg," said Maureen Bausch, the mall's vice president for business development.

Another new addition would be the first Kimpton Hotel in Minnesota, listed in plans as an eight-story edifice slated for construction on the south side of the mall. The \$40 million project, pending city approval, would take about 14 to 16 months to build. "Room rates would range from \$180 to \$250 per night," said Tom Landner, vice president of Mortenson Development Inc., the hotel's developer.

The move to begin work on elements of the new project seemed to have been bolstered by the recent settlement of a lawsuit over ownership of the megamall. The Ghermezian brothers took 100 percent ownership of the mall, settling the dispute that appeared to hold up progress. The Bloomington City Council has given preliminary approval to plans for Phase II. Final approval must still come from the council.

Bausch said the mall is in talks with several other possible new tenants in both the existing mall and Phase II. She also said the mall is in talks with a variety of suitors to "re-brand" the former Camp Snoopy amusement park. The Mall of America couldn't reach a new agreement with the firm that owns the rights to the "Peanuts" characters last year and had to remove all references to Charlie Brown and his companions. Bausch said attendance has not declined since losing the "Peanuts" images.

Bill Griffith, attorney for the mall, confirmed that mall owners plan to seek tax-increment financing help from the city and state to help complete the project. He said the project is dependent upon approval of TIF funding. He pointed out that the mall can't receive TIF aid for any retail project, only for public improvements such as parking ramps, roads and bridges. Griffith said it's too early to tell how much TIF aid the megamall will request. Perhaps anticipating criticism of the TIF request, Griffith said the mall is not trying to dodge its responsibility. He said the Mall of America and its tenants pay about \$48.3 million in local and state taxes annually.