

OMAHA WORLD-HERALD

New life for Aksarben neighborhood

BY HOWARD K. MARCUS

WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER | Posted: Sunday, October 4, 2015

The horses are long gone, but the race to fill up the former Aksarben property is headed toward the finish line.

"The redevelopment is taking on a life of its own and happening very rapidly," Omaha City Councilman Chris Jerram said of the soon-to-open Baxter Arena's neighborhood.

"To the north, in Aksarben Village, that's been a very dynamic growth, with more development underway and more coming in the future."

Jerram said street extensions around the arena will spur additional development to the south and west.

David Fanslau, Omaha's assistant director for urban planning, agreed that development in the neighborhood has been rapid.

Aksarben Village stretches from Center Street north to Pine Street and from 63rd Street west to the Little Papillion Creek. The development is home to restaurants, retail, office buildings, apartments and townhouses, hotels, a fitness center, a movie theater and a park with an amphitheater.

The mixed-use agreement for the 70-acre development was approved in October 2006, and the space was divided into 10 zones.

"The only large piece that is still able to be developed is what the agreement refers to as Zone 6," Fanslau said. "That's between Frances on the south and Shirley on the north, 64th Avenue on the east and 67th on the west."

He added that it's just a matter of time before that space is developed. "I expect sooner than later we'll see something — some type of proposal on that ground," he said.

Current construction projects in Aksarben Village include multifamily units on the west side of 64th Avenue and a three-story office building off Aksarben Drive.

"There's still activity, and there's still room to grow," Fanslau said. "It's amazing."

For much of the 20th century, the site that stretched from Center to Pacific Streets was home to the Ak-Sar-Ben Racetrack and Coliseum. The track's final season was 1995; demolition of the facilities came in 2005.

Aksarben Village and Baxter Arena have sprung up along Center Street, and much of the rest of the former Aksarben property is home to UNO's Pacific Street Campus, which includes the Peter Kiewit Institute, Mammel Hall, the Scott Conference Center and student housing.

Diana Failla, president of the Midtown Neighborhood Alliance, said she sees the arena and nearby redevelopment as positives for the area, noting that the site once drew thousands to stage shows, hockey games, ice shows and other events at the Ak Coliseum.

"In a way, this is new. But it's really also sort of a revitalization of what used to be," she said.

Failla praised the way the University of Nebraska at Omaha kept neighborhood associations informed during arena construction.

"They reached out with their plans. They shared, they solicited for ideas," she said. "I think the Baxter Arena really is just kind of taking community engagement to a whole new level in a different way — in an entertainment, family facility way."

"In a way this is new, but it's really also sort of a revitalization of what used to be."

Diana Failla, president of the Midtown Neighborhood Alliance