

City picks developer for hotel

John Q. Hammons tapped by Denton, UNT for project to include meeting space
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By Candace Carlisle / Staff Writer

The University of North Texas and the city of Denton have begun negotiations with a developer to build a full-service hotel, including meeting and convention facilities, on 10 acres off Interstate 35E.

Missouri-based developer John Q. Hammons Hotels & Resorts was chosen primarily because it would be able to build the highest-quality product for the university and the city, said Milton "Pat" Howell, special assistant to UNT President Gretchen Bataille and engineer on the project.

"They were looking for a developer that was willing to design, to build, to finance and to operate a high-quality hotel and convention room center site," Howell said.

Last fall, he said, six hotel companies replied to requests for proposals that were sent to 60 local and national hotel developers. From there, it took months of meetings for UNT and city officials to whittle down the list to one preferred developer -- John Q. Hammons.

"We spent quite a bit of time making sure and interviewing and making proposals to make sure we got the very best one," Howell said. "It wasn't a quick process. It was a deliberate process to find the very best one."

But it is just the beginning, he said. Other aspects of the project, such as financing for the minimum 250 rooms and 45,000 square feet of meeting space, will evolve as negotiations proceed.

The city has lost more than \$10 million in potential economic revenue through September 2010 because Denton does not have enough meeting space to host certain events, said Kim Phillips, vice president of the Denton Convention and Visitor Bureau.

"Denton really needs this," Phillips said. "We wish we had a larger meeting space, and this is just so tangible. It gives us great hope."

That hope is shared with the hotel developer, said Scott Tarwater, executive vice president of development for John Q. Hammons Hotels & Resorts.

"Mr. Hammons has had his eye on Denton for quite some time," Tarwater said. "Mr. Hammons and John Q. Hammons Hotels & Resorts appreciate the combined growth potential the city of Denton and the University of North Texas represent."

The company is building hotels near universities in Norman, Okla., and San Marcos, said Sheri Smith, spokeswoman for John Q. Hammons Hotels & Resorts.

"Regardless of the economic cycle, university cities continue to do well because people continue to get their education," Smith said.

The city of Denton is still trying to determine the economic impact of a hotel on the community, which will influence the negotiations moving forward, said Linda Ratliff, director of economic development for the city.

"If we partner in it financially, we want to make sure we're not losing money on the deal," Ratliff said.

But stopping the loss of revenue from local events going elsewhere for hotel and convention space and attracting new people to Denton will only help the business community, she said.

"Having a convention center in Denton would really make Denton a standalone community," Ratliff said. "And not only a standalone city, but a center for something, bringing in people from all over and bringing people to Denton that haven't been to Denton before."

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