



Coveted farm and Boys Town property, long surrounded by development, are site of Omaha's next big mixed-use project

By Cindy Gonzalez / World-Herald staff writer Apr 14, 2016



It's enough to get any developer's adrenaline pumping: hundreds of acres ripe for new offices, shops and housing that border Omaha's busy West Dodge Road corridor.

Now that tract of undeveloped land — owned partly by Boys Town and totaling nearly 500 acres — is being sold, with new life to come as a mixed-use campus anchored by a company with local workers and ties.

For perspective, the land being sold is about seven times the size of the 70-acre Aksarben Village, near 67th and Center Streets.

Noddle Cos. has been tapped by the unidentified firm to be the lead developer of the land, Chief Executive Jay Noddle told The World-Herald. He said the buyer wants to remain unidentified for now but plans to move hundreds of employees into office space to be built there. Its workforce now is scattered among several local buildings.

Considered a rare catch because of its central location, sheer size and West Dodge frontage, the project area comes in two pieces: roughly 260 acres known as the Boys Town West Farm, and the 225-acre DeMarco farmland.

The Boys Town portion stretches six blocks along West Dodge from 144th to 150th Streets, and runs south to Pacific Street. Millard North High School sits on the corner of 144th and Pacific Streets, and would remain.



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The DeMarco land, on the other side of Pacific, runs still farther south to about Shirley Street.

“It’s a sort of hole in the doughnut,” Noddle said of the land, which is surrounded by commercial and residential development.

Many eyes will be on the project, said World Group Commercial Real Estate’s T.J. Twit.

“West Dodge is the center of the universe for a lot of tenants,” he said, “and 144th and Dodge today feels like infill development, to some degree.”

R.J. Neary of Investors Realty said he expects a gradual and successful build-out similar to office parks to the north of Dodge — the First National Bank and Bank of the West business park developments.

“Everything on Dodge Street seems to work,” Neary said. “Your infrastructure is excellent on all sides.”

Noddle said the deal came together after the buyer’s agents already had launched efforts to buy the DeMarco property a few years back. Then Boys Town officials began their active marketing of the neighboring West Farm.

Efforts turned to buying both sections.

Because the buyer’s office needs would take up just a slice of the area, it tapped Noddle to be master developer of the entire site.

Other Noddle-involved projects include Aksarben Village and chunks of the downtown Omaha riverfront.

Similar to the 11-year-old Aksarben Village built on the former Ak-Sar-Ben racetrack grounds, the new development is expected to take more than a decade to fill out.

The Noddle company also shepherded the redevelopment of the Boys Town north property on the other side of West Dodge Road. That roughly 300 acres became the First National Bank Business Park, Linden Estates II and what is known today as the Bank of the West Business Park.

Boys Town spokeswoman Kara Neuverth said that although Boys Town is selling the West Farm property with certain restrictions, Boys Town will not be part of the new development.

“The goal is to replicate the sale and development of the North property,” she said.

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That could mean offices, a hotel, restaurants, retailers and medical-related services subject to Boys Town approval, she said. It also could include residences — houses, apartments and retirement communities.

James Maenner of CBRE/Mega Real Estate, said he has watched interest build in the Boys Town West Farm. In a newsletter, he called it the “finest parcel” of development ground in Nebraska and the states surrounding it.

“It is going to be a significant and admired addition to our metro area,” Maenner said.

Add the DeMarco farm, and, said Noddle: “This is a huge piece of land representing the largest concentration of undeveloped land in the area.”

Arvin DeMarco, an owner of the DeMarco farmland, said his family has had other offers over the years to sell the land, which they’ve had more than 50 years.

“We agreed we were not going to sell unless they would be good stewards,” he said. “What they propose and talked about — this is the real deal, a real first-class deal.”

He said the buyers also agreed to let him and his sister, Gina, continue to reside in the farmhouse on the land.

“We think it’s a home run for us to move ahead,” he said.

Noddle said his company has started to assemble a team of land planners, engineers, soil specialists and others. Designs are in early stages, but he envisions new-to-Omaha retailers, a full-service hotel and public spaces including a play area similar to Aksarben’s Stinson Park.

Asked whether the land was a contender for the HDR headquarters site, Noddle said: “That’s up to HDR.”

Currently on the West Farm, Neuverth said, are a few barns and old structures used previously for housing.

She said Boys Town declared the West Farm excess property in 2004 because its main land bordered by Pacific, West Dodge, 132nd and 144th Streets had ample room for any expansion needs.

After the recovery from the economic downturn of the late 2000s, Boys Town decided to actively market the West Farm. A meeting was held a year ago in April to relay Boys Town’s wishes to interested developers and buyers.

The West Farm’s history with Boys Town dates to the 1930s, when

rather Pfanagan bought the property to expand the farm operation for boys who lived in the village. At that time, the land fed the boys. Boys Town later built a dairy barn for milking and cottages for staff. It was a working farm until the 1980s; then the farmland's focus turned to the 4-H program.

Neuverth said the land's food-supply role ended because of more stringent health regulations. Smells of the operation also became an irritant to neighbors as the city's population expanded westward.

Most recently, the land was used for community gardens. Hogs, chickens and small animals have been moved to the barn on the east side of the campus.

Boys Town declined to name its selling price, saying it was still finalizing the sale with a purchaser it declined to name because of a confidentiality agreement.

Proceeds are to help the kids, Neuverth said.

"The money from the sale will be used to take care of more children and families," she said.

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Applied Underwriters, part of Berkshire Hathaway, is company planning to develop Boys Town farmland near 144th, West Dodge

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On a piece of the vast farm area near 144th Street and West Dodge Road, Applied Underwriters intends to build a new hub for its local workforce of between 650 and 700. The rest is to become more offices, shops, housing, restaurants, hotel rooms, public space and more.

\$200 million development plan for land off I-80 includes auto dealerships, retailers

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Auto dealerships, retailers, distribution centers, warehouses and wholesalers are all part of plans for the more than 350 acres bordering I-80 near Highway 370. An iconic early-20th-century barn on the land is being carefully taken down.

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