

Aerospace industrial park planned near airport

By Brook Stockberger Sun-News Business Editor
Las Cruces Sun-News

LAS CRUCES — Business owners who want to locate near the Las Cruces International Airport in the not-too-distant future will be greeted by the site of a 170-acre industrial park — within an industrial park.

That's the vision of the Rocket Racing League (RRL).

The league, which has offices in Las Cruces and plans to house its facilities adjacent to the airport, hopes to buy from the city a chunk of property that sits between Interstate 10 and the airport.

The land is part of a larger area known as the West Mesa Industrial Park and includes property on both sides of the highway.

The company — a NASCAR-style racing league that intends to race rocket-powered aircraft — would then develop a business park for companies that work with and support the league as well as other aerospace-related firms.

"Imagine every corporate executive that lands here, and they drive down this road and they see a Class A business park," said John Hummer, chief executive officer and a partner with Steinborn Inc.. Hummer heads up a limited liability company called RRL Land Development LLC, that will manage development of the proposed industrial park.

"I think it'll help fill a definite need for a better-quality business park that would be appealing to high-tech companies," said Steve Vierck, president and CEO of the Mesilla Valley Economic Development Alliance.

The West Mesa Strategic Committee voted recently to support the league's request and will recommend approval of the purchase to the Las Cruces City Council.

Christine Ochs, a member of the committee and the city's former community development director, said the proposed land purchase will be presented to the council on Sept. 18, with full discussion on Oct. 4.

She said the RRL is interested in several parcels that are already planned and subdivided, which it would purchase for \$25,000 an acre. The rest of the land still

requires master planning and would be priced at \$13,000 an acre.

Ochs said RRL will be responsible for master planning the rest of the property.

"The city has already created 15 lots that are ready to go and they want three of those," she said.

The league also has asked for a right-of-first-refusal for an additional 177 acres near the airport.

City Councilor Steve Trowbridge, chair of the West Mesa Strategic Committee, said he likes the proposed deal because "it does not leave the city and taxpayers on the hook for development.

"This is a really good situation," Trowbridge said. "The city is not funding the infrastructure."

That is a different situation than a performance-based agreement between the city and Starchaser Industries that fell through earlier this year. Because the city considered giving land to Starchaser, the company would have been required to provide financial records to the city and would have been required to create new jobs with salaries higher than the average salary in Doña Ana County.

But Rocket Racing League is looking to purchase land outright from the city.

"You put the development, marketing and subdividing into hands of the developer," Ochs said.

An industrial park is an important step in the league's future plans. Granger Whitelaw, the league's CEO, said company officials want Las Cruces to experience a similar impact as Charlotte, N.C., has had from NASCAR, and Indianapolis has from the Indy Racing League.

"What we're trying to do on the (West) Mesa is put down the blueprint for an infrastructure that can support all of those businesses," Whitelaw said. "We want to attract those business to New Mexico."

Las Cruces also hosts the X-Prize Cup, an aviation and aerospace exposition held in October at the airport.

Tim Gormley, league vice president of operations, said an industry cluster is sought near the airport.

"For instance, our airframe manufacturer; it'll be easier for them to assemble airframes in Las Cruces than to do it in Florida and transport them," he said. "We have the

businesses and companies that are already affiliated with us. We're encouraging our (racing) teams to be here and have hanger operations here. We're encouraging the business to grow around us."

Hummer, who used to be CEO of MountainView Regional Medical Center and was instrumental in getting that facility built, said that working with RRL fits right into his new position with Steinborn Inc.

"I made a career change. This opportunity with RRL Land Development fits hand-in-hand with what I have chosen to do with the rest of my life here in Las Cruces," he said. "My business is real estate and real estate development now."

Last month Steinborn Inc. Realtors Commercial Division announced it had joined TCN Worldwide Commercial Division, an international commercial real estate organization. It will be the "sales and leasing representative" for the proposed industrial park, Hummer said.

"Any and all developers in this community are welcome to be part of this future vision," he said. "All other local commercial real estate firms (and) developers are going to be encouraged to participate to be part of this."

"We're going to need all the help we can get to make this work," Gormley said.

Ochs added there are other parties who are interested in obtaining land on the West Mesa Industrial Park, south of I-10.

"We have some groups that have looked twice," she said. "We don't have anything solid, but we have three groups that have shown significant interest."

Brook Stockberger can be reached at bstockberger@lcsun-news.com

What: Industrial park for aerospace-related companies

Where: Near the Las Cruces International Airport

Size: 170 acres

Who: Rocket Racing League wants to buy the land from the city of Las Cruces

Cost: \$25,000 per acre for subdivided lots; \$13,000 per acre for land that still needs master planning
Aerospace industrial park planned near airport

Rocket Racing League eyes NASCAR as economic model

By Brook Stockberger Sun-News Business Editor
Las Cruces Sun-News

LAS CRUCES — Grab a calculator and start pressing buttons. It will not take you long to figure out what the answer is when you divide 5.4 billion by four. The little screen should produce the number 1.3 billion.

Now imagine those numbers represent dollars and you can understand what makes Tim Gormley smile.

The vice president of operations for the Rocket Racing League said that his company has used NASCAR has a model for success. And, Gormley points out, the racing league based in Charlotte, N.C., has a tremendous impact on the southern city and its surrounding area.

"In 2003, the impact in that one year on Charlotte was \$5.4 billion dollars and 29,000 jobs," Gormley said. "And the impact on Indianapolis (for the Indy Racing League) is almost identical for what it is at Charlotte.

"If we could just get a slice of that," he said. "If we were a quarter as successful, the impact for the state of New Mexico and this valley alone would be unbelievable. It may take us 5 years, 10 years to grow it, but oh my gosh, what a great opportunity."

For those who might be a little confused — what with so much talk about Spaceport America and the development called Rocket City the company Starchaser plans to build — the Rocket Racing League (RRL) is a sports entertainment company like NASCAR, or IRL or even the NFL if you chose to look at it that way. The league plans to hold races around the country and eventually around the world. Its base facilities will be built here in Las Cruces and the company already has an office here.

"Las Cruces will be recognized globally as the home of the RRL," he said. "People will know it all over the world. You think of Indy racing, you think of Indianapolis; when you think of NASCAR you think of Charlotte. When people think of RRL, they'll think of Las Cruces."

John Hummer, CEO and partner with Steinborn Inc., in Las Cruces, heads up a limited liability company called RRL Land Development LLC, that will manage development of an industrial park the RRL plans to build west of the city.

"I just think this is one of the most exciting developments that our city is dealing with

at this time," he said. "The highest spectator event is air shows and everybody knows the thrill of racing. They have brought the two together."

Ben Estrada said he likes auto racing and has heard of RRL, but was still unsure how to picture the sport.

"I guess they're going to be flying around above you," he said. "That sounds fun, but will you be able to see them?"

He said he will be interested to see the races.

"I'll definitely check it out," he said.

Bobby Morales from El Paso said he visits friends in Las Cruces from time to time. He said he isn't a big sports fan, but he would consider taking a trip up the interstate to see what the RRL is about.

"As long as they don't crash on me," he said with a laugh. "It sounds fun."

Gormley said he wants people to be able to open up their morning newspapers and read the results from RRL races. After all, co-founder Granger Whitelaw is a two-time Indianapolis 500 champion team partner.

And as with any sports league, a big component comes in the form of marketing and promotion.

Gormley, a New Mexico State University graduate, spends a lot of the time thinking about teenagers wearing RRL T-shirts as they race rockets on their Xbox game systems. He can envision adults watching a live rocket race on the Internet while their children build RRL vehicles out of LEGO pieces and collect their RRL action figures.

There has been talk of an IMAX film of rocket racing and a mention of creating a children's animation series.

"There can be hats, shirts, online stuff, toys, licensing agreements," he said. "Part of our initial building will be a distribution building."

On its Web site, www.rocketracingleague.com, the league has an online store section where, shirts, hats, visors, badges, lapel pins and travel mugs are already for sale.

Gormley said that the merchandising aspect to the business can have an impact on the Las Cruces area.

"A lot of the merchandising stuff, we're sourcing from local providers," he said.

In the not-too-distant future, the RRL envisions that travelers along I-10 will be greeted by the league's facilities that will include everything from a visitor's center to a hall of fame for rocket racing.

There could also be a RRL-theme park with rides and rocket simulators. Whitelaw said the RRL facilities and events would be enough to stimulate business on their own and also attract businesses like hotels and restaurants.

"The economic impact a league like this can have on a community is astronomical," he said.

A company like RRL is obviously heavily connected with technology. And with all the aerospace industry that is expected to descend on southern New Mexico, the company wants to have its industrial park ready to provide sites for other firms, many of which will work with RRL.

"There needs to be an infrastructure in place to support that emerging market," Whitelaw said. "If there is not, it will wane, it will fade and it will not grow as successful as it could."

Gormley said that science, technology and education also go hand in hand.

"Education is a big part of it," he said.

"We're trying to drive kids back to math and science. Maybe we'll just be a small part of that but a small part would be a big step."

The league also envisions students at NMSU and Doña Ana Community College studying in programs geared toward a career in rocket racing.

The RRL was established by Whitelaw along with X-Prize founder Peter Diamandis.

The duo put their heads together after a visit to the Indianapolis 500.

"I had advised him to come to the race," Whitelaw said. "He had just joined a think tank I was running at the time.

"We went back to the hotel and all of a sudden its 3 a.m. and we were eating Steak & Shake all night and we looked up and we had our papers every where and our computers out and we had kind of outlined the Rocket Racing League."

He said the two never looked back.

"We wanted to take the energy and enthusiasm and fan base that Peter saw at the Indianapolis 500 and somehow bring that into the space and aeronautic industry," he

said.

According to the league's Web site, The NASCAR-style racing league features rocket-powered aircraft that will be flown by top pilots through a three-dimensional "trackway" at venues throughout the world.

The company chose southern New Mexico for a variety of reasons.

"Why did we pick New Mexico? The highest population of Ph.Ds in the country, national labs, it has a governor who is very supportive of this new, emerging space industry," Whitelaw said.

"The universities are fantastic. New Mexico is our home and I think with what the people are doing with building the spaceport, it is a natural fit for us."

Brook Stockberger can be reached at bstockberger@lcsun-news.com