Gardner Co.’s vision for Downtown Boise

The 8th and Main developer has a new big idea. Can a plan for transit and convention centers resolve conflicts that have vexed Boise for years?

By SVEN BERG

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Gardner’s planned office building is left of the existing U.S. Bank tower in this rendering. The proposed meeting/convention building is right of the tower. Main Street can be seen at the far left.

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Sven has covered Boise city government and development for the Statesman since July 2012.

Idaho’s tallest and second-tallest buildings were just an introduction to the Gardner Co.’s plan for Downtown Boise.

Gardner bought the 267-foot U.S. Bank building in August. Across the street, it’s putting the finishing touches on the 327-foot 8th and Main building, which opens early next year.

Chief Operating Officer Tommy Ahlquist calls the company’s next project, the $70 million City Center Plaza, its “crown jewel.”

Here’s what the company envisions: a nine-story, 206,000-square-foot retail and office building on the west side of U.S. Bank Plaza. A skybridge will connect that structure to a four- or five-story building on the U.S. Bank tower’s south side. The south building, with a footprint of about 25,000 square feet, will have two floors of parking and two or three floors of meeting and convention space. Lying beneath it all will be a transit station of almost an acre underground. The expected completion date is early 2016.

Ahlquist said companies are lining up to lease retail and office space in the new buildings, even though Gardner has yet to apply for the permits to build them.

Boise tech pioneer Clearwater Analytics already has signed an agreement to help pay for the west building, to be called the Clearwater Building. As its anchor tenant, Clearwater will occupy the top four floors — some 90,000 square feet.

Gardner has letters of intent from nine companies interested in renting five first-floor restaurant spaces, Ahlquist said.

Alone, those two buildings are an ambitious project. But the rest of Ahlquist’s plan is the real challenge, and it could transform Downtown Boise.

AHLQUIST’S CRAZY DREAM

Ahlquist and his family were on a cruise halfway around the world when the idea hit him to put a transit center underneath City Center Plaza.

He called from the ship off the Greek coast to share his epiphany with a few Gardner people. They thought he was crazy.

Valley Regional Transit, Ada and Canyon counties’ public transportation authority, had approached Gardner months before about working together on a transit hub at the southwest corner of 8th and Jefferson streets. The transportation authority would use $12 million from a federal earmark and Boise’s urban renewal agency to pay for the transit station, and Gardner would put a commercial development on top of it. Ahlquist said he’d take a look.

It didn’t work out. Too many powerful people — neighbors in the Hoff Building to the south, lawmakers at the Capitol building to the northeast — were against it. And there was no interest from the types of businesses that might want to rent retail or office space, Ahlquist said.

By the time Gardner had finished its research, Ahlquist said, most of his crew wanted no part of a public-
private transit partnership. Now he was telling them he wanted to put one underneath the company’s Boise nerve center: the corner of 8th and Main streets.

“Internally, we’ve said, ‘Is it worth it for us to really go after this and do it right?’” Ahlquist said. “And the answer to that is, ‘For the good of the city and the Treasure Valley, and for our projects long-term, yes.’”

As if the transit center weren’t hard enough, Ahlquist has fixed his eye on what may be a thornier problem: the Greater Boise Auditorium District’s desire for more convention space.

The district has been banging its head against this problem since the 1990s. It wants an additional 50,000 square feet of exhibition space, 15,000 square feet of meeting space and 15,000 square feet of ballroom space to augment the facility it owns and operates at the Boise Centre next to the Grove. It has more than $13 million to spend, not including yearly surplus income of more than $2 million from the room tax it collects. Its leaders want to use that money to build a new convention center or expand the Boise Centre.

Ahlquist proposes setting aside space in one or both of Gardner’s planned buildings to meet the Auditorium District’s demand for more convention space.

THE BIG PICTURE

The transit center and convention space expansion have something in common: They’re politicized projects that public opinion and technical roadblocks have derailed repeatedly. Ahlquist and the Gardner Co. know the pitfalls. They’re still interested, though Ahlquist stressed that the company’s plans for both are preliminary and might never take form.

It would be easier for Gardner to build nothing more than a retail-office-parking development at U.S. Bank Plaza.

That project would be profitable and add to Gardner’s and Ahlquist’s considerable prestige. But profitable buildings are just one piece of what Ahlquist says he wants. The big dream is a more prosperous and enjoyable Boise.

New convention space and better transit options would lay the groundwork for that dream, he said.

“Public transportation will evolve over the next 20 years. It just will,” Ahlquist said. “And as it evolves, we cannot think of a better location to have that transportation hub than right in the middle of everything, both for the health of the city and for our project and for everything else we’re doing.”

CONVENTION CONUNDRUM

Pat Rice, the Greater Boise Auditorium District’s executive director, has seen plenty of ideas come and go without any dirt being moved.

There’s been talk of adding a few floors to Boise Centre, the district’s existing convention center on Front Street.

A district-owned lot between 11th, 13th, Front and Myrtle streets was once the chosen site for a brand-new convention center.

In 2006, hotel magnate John Q. Hammons said he wanted to build a hotel and convention center in Downtown Boise.

None of those proposals worked out. Each one was too small, too expensive, in the wrong place or the wrong shape.

So the district’s top boss is skeptical about fresh new ideas that seem, on their surface, a perfect way to expand the district’s convention space.
Gardner’s proposal to build new convention space on the U.S. Bank Plaza is no different.

Location is one of its advantages. U.S. Bank Plaza lies on the other side of The Grove from Boise Centre. If Gardner could provide new meeting space on its property, moving between events and The Grove Hotel next door would be easy, fast and convenient.

Being in the middle of Downtown is attractive, too, Rice said.

Then there’s Gardner’s reputation. So far, the company has given Boise no reason to question its competence. Gardner is a strong, capable firm that moves fast, and has yet to take a false step here.

You don’t turn the Boise Hole — the excavated foundation at 8th and Main for what was to have been the Boise Tower, which became a citywide joke — into Idaho’s tallest building without some ability.

But chops alone won’t solve the GBAD riddle.

“John Q. Hammons was the No. 1 convention hotelier in the country and we couldn’t make it happen with him,” Rice said. “John Q. got sick. The economy tanked, and then he died.”

The concept for this part of Gardner’s project is fuzzy at best. Would the Auditorium District pay Gardner to build convention space, then operate the new space together with Boise Centre as a single complex? Or would the district use the new space to host conventions while Boise Centre shuts down for an expansion?

There are no answers to those questions yet.

“The goal is more meeting space, but it has to be done right. You just can’t plop a ballroom down on the street and say it works,” Rice said. “The pieces, so far, have been out there for several developers and, so far, we haven’t been able to make a puzzle out of it.”

**HOPE FOR THE HUB**

Compared to Gardner’s convention space proposal, the transit center is at an advanced stage. Gardner was the only company that responded to a request for qualifications from Valley Regional Transit.

Gardner has hired engineers to predict how the hub would affect traffic and whether it’s safe to dig 20 feet under the plaza’s west side. They’ve developed the details: bus entrance and exit routes, artist renderings and designs for a 40,000-square-foot space for loading and unloading eight buses, ticketing and waiting areas and a police station that the city of Boise proposed incorporating into earlier versions of the transit center.

Ahlquist said his company can build the hub within the budget prescribed by the federal earmark, which has sat unspent since 2007.

Gardner is paying for design and study of the site out of its own pocket. If the transit center project doesn’t work, Gardner won’t recover that $500,000, Ahlquist said.

Gardner’s proposal has promise, Valley Regional Transit Executive Director Kelli Fairless said. Earlier ideas came during the Great Recession when developers’ appetite for new projects waned. The location was wrong for others.

Gardner has timing, location, money and technical wherewithal on its side, Fairless said.

“The development environment is a little more favorable for a project like this,” she said. “Gardner, as a potential private partner for the project, they just really have a great vision for how this could be a positive part of the project.”

The company has explained its concept to the city, the transit authority and Ada County Highway District, which maintains Boise streets. So far, no fatal flaws have emerged. And there have been no protests from neighbors, which is what undermined other proposals.
“Location is what makes this possible,” Ahlquist said. “If you took this same concept and moved it out of the core, it would really be a bus station. It would feel like a bus station. It would look like a bus station. It would be very, very hard to get retail tenants or office tenants to go be part of that project.”

There are plenty of obstacles. Since federal taxpayer money would pay for the transit center, Valley Regional Transit has to jump through the hoops that federal projects require. That means someone has to analyze potential environmental impacts. Someone else has to appraise the property to make sure the transit authority’s not paying too much for it.

One way or the other, the transit authority would buy the hub, but it’s still unclear how Gardner would collect money for it. One option is for Valley Regional Transit to buy the transit center from the company when the project’s finished, Fairless said. Another is to draw money from a federal account to pay Gardner installments as its contractors reach progress milestones.

Gardner hopes to break ground on the entire project, including retail-office-parking space and, possibly, the transit hub and convention space sometime in the summer.

Fairless hopes Valley Regional Transit can get through the hub’s obstacles by then. One measure of the seriousness of Ahlquist’s plan: Fairless said the transit authority has given up on all its other proposals.

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