

# 'Amazing' projects on tap in northeast Johnson County



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It's been a long time since northeast Johnson County's development heyday in the 1950s and 1960s during the post-World War II housing boom.

But if a couple of big projects move forward as expected next year, those tree-lined neighborhoods with their ranch homes and split-levels may steal some of the spotlight from where the action's been the past 30 years south of Interstate 435.

After more than seven years of trying, the \$130 million Mission Gateway mixed-use development — anchored by a two-level Walmart at Roe Avenue and Johnson Drive — is teed up for final consideration Nov. 27 by the Mission City Council.

And in the biggest retail coup of the new century, Ikea officials will introduce their preliminary development plan Nov. 7 to the Merriam City Council. The renowned Swedish furnishings company wants to build its first store in a six-state region at Interstate 35 and Johnson Drive.

Combined with major reinvestments that Lane4 Property Group is making at the aging Corinth and Prairie Village shopping centers — as well as its new Mission Crossing development, and a new Walmart grocery store being built in Westwood — it's the kind of reinvestment considered vital to inner-ring suburbs.

"It's amazing, as the Northeast Johnson County Chamber of Commerce, having all of this occurring," said Deb Settle, president and CEO. "It's been a sleepy part of the county, and it's not going to be that way."

The developer of the Mission Gateway project, Tom Valenti of Cameron Development Group of Syracuse, N.Y., has reached an agreement with Mission officials on a \$36 million incentive package needed to prepare his 26-acre site for redevelopment.

The tax incentives would pay for site work and a garage for a development that includes 300,000 square feet of retail and 300 apartments.

It also will repay the \$12 million invested by Mission in a massive storm sewer built shortly after the old Mission Center mall was demolished in 2005 to make way for the new project.

"We've got a general agreement with the city administration as to what that package should look like," Valenti said. "The bond situation and overall financial benefits should work well for the city and for us. There are a lot of protections for the city."

The \$36 million in bonds would be repaid by part of the additional property and sales taxes expected to be generated by the Gateway project, along with revenue generated by a community improvement district.

Mission Mayor Laura McConwell said an independent review done for her city by Real Estate Research Corp. confirmed the financial projections would more than cover the cost of repaying the bonds.

Public meetings on the incentive request are scheduled for Nov. 12 and 13 at the Sylvester Powell Community Center before the council meeting.

So far, Valenti has signed up tenants for about two-thirds of the retail space. Besides Walmart, a Sprouts Family Market has agreed to occupy 25,000 square feet; a Toby Keith's "I Love This Bar & Grill" restaurant about 10,000 square feet; and an Aspen Fitness Center 23,000 square feet.

The developer hopes to break ground this spring, and McConwell thinks more tenants will follow once construction starts.

"The community is looking forward to construction getting under way of this mixed-use development that will conform with our community vision," she said.

In Merriam, the Ikea coup will make a big plus out of the never-opened Merriam Village shopping center, which will be demolished to make way for the 349,000-square-foot blue-and-yellow behemoth. Ikea's huge investment in the new store, to open in fall 2014, is a vote of confidence for that community, and the established core of the entire metro area.

"This is an economic benefit not only for northeast Johnson County, but all of the metro," Settle said. "Being landlocked, there had been no place to go."

Dean Katerndahl of the First Suburbs Coalition at the Mid-America Regional Council said Ikea might be taking advantage of being relatively near the young professionals who prefer living close to the city, while at the same time reinforcing the center of the metro area with its investment.

"Being closer in allows them to tap that younger market close to the core and downtown, and yet still be close to housing farther out on I-35," he said.

He also praised Mission for sticking to its plan for transforming the Gateway site with an infill project that includes housing and new retail.

"They've been working long and hard," he said. "It's important because they don't have room to grow. They've stuck to their vision by and large."

