Bon Marche given new name, direction

By CHAD CALDER

California developer Norie Harrower Thursday unveiled details of his $40 million effort to redevelop the former Bon Marche mall into a mixed-use development that could include a hotel, amphitheater, housing complex for the elderly, ice skating rink and sports complex.

While Harrower has only three announced tenants for the newly renamed Bon Carré, he said he is in negotiations with several national hotel chains for a five-story, 100-room hotel; a local grocer for a supermarket; and the Baton Rouge Kingsfish to locate a team practice facility at the complex's proposed ice-skiing rink.

Harrower and his development group, Bon Marche LLC, presented the plan Thursday night to the same residents who gathered in February to brainstorm ideas on how to bring the virtually abandoned mall back to life.

The Tigers Boulevard side of Bon Carré would feature a town square with a hotel, live theatre and restaurants; and a riverfront area with a supermarket and Dillard’s department store.

"It's something that we'd like to become involved with," he said, adding he is impressed with what he has seen so far.

"These guys are very impressive. They have a phenomenal plan put together," Harrower said.

Harrows said a practice facility would help the team further one of its main goals, to help pertinent youth hockey in and around Baton Rouge.

Harrower is counting on sports to bring activity to Bon Carré in the evenings and on weekends to feed the hotel and retail establishments.

A planned sports and entertainment facility would have a basketball court, swimming pool and a health club.

At the west end of the development's Florida Boulevard facade, Harrower said plans are afoot to bring in a grocery store in the most requested tenant at the Bon Carré hearings. He said he is in talks with a local grocer for the site, though he could not give the name.

This portion would include 100,000 square feet of additional retail space.

At the back of the development, plans call for a pond, an elderly care facility, some senior housing, a day-care center and an amphitheater.

Some participants in February's brainstorming session said they wanted to see senior housing and child care near each other.

Harrower said the layout of the rear portion is the most subject to change, noting the elderly- and child-care facilities might be moved closer to the center. "We're still deciding that one," he said. "And we have to see what the people think." The site's plans are not confined to the 70-acre site. He has the commitment of the mayor's office to redevelop crime and push drugs out of the nearby neighborhoods in Melrose East.

"I want it made very clear that we're not just concerned with what's on this piece of paper right here," he said, pointing to a rendering of the 70-acre site. "I can't make this work without making the surrounding area safer."

Mayor Tom McHugh confirmed he has spoken with Harrower's group and will do what it takes to make the surrounding area safer.

Harrower said he wants the focus to be on the neighborhoods and property owners who have turned a blind eye to the neighborhood, letting a small percentage prey upon and degrade the quality of life for the rest of the residents.

Harrower plans to take an active role in improving the overall community, with the nearby residential properties under contract for an acquisition.

"Everyone has to stand up and change the tenor of this community," he said. "And we're ready to take the lead."

Harrower said Uffited, an organization that helps disadvantaged people train for and find employment, has applied to the U.S. Department of Labor for a $1.9 million grant to train and pay 100 welfare recipients to work at Bon Carré.

Harrower said virtually all of the design and construction work will go to local companies, which would help boost the local economy.