

StarTribune

NEWS

Blaine back to attracting business; Undaunted by the collapse of the Vikings stadium deal and the loss of a key city official, the city is poised for new growth.

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639 words

25 September 2007

Star-Tribune

METRO

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English

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A yearlong moratorium on development in Blaine ended Monday, but the city knows of no bidders on 720 acres once designated for a Vikings stadium.

The city manager, who sent letters to 40 prospective bidders on the land, resigned suddenly last month and has yet to be replaced.

Yet, despite adversity, Blaine appears to be thriving. One corporation is preparing to move its national headquarters to the Anoka County city. Other business owners have inquired about potential land deals. And a long-standing lawsuit over property that the Vikings coveted finally has been settled.

"We're supposed to be in a holding pattern and it seems like everything has worked against us since the Vikings' deal fell apart," said Mayor Tom Ryan. "But, honestly, we couldn't be in better shape."

Just seven weeks after the departure of City Manager Ron Wood, who helped orchestrate a game plan for Blaine after the Vikings and Anoka County severed ties last fall, the city will host a groundbreaking Friday for Infinite Campus, which plans to build a \$20 million national headquarters near the city's Village shopping center.

Infinite Campus - a provider of data-management systems for schools in 41 states and for about half of Minnesota's school districts, including St. Paul and Duluth - plans to build its 110,000-square-foot headquarters on a 25-acre site that the city has owned for the past 20 years. The company, currently based in Arden Hills, is expected to bring as many as 400 employees to its new base. Many of those employees already are looking for homes in Blaine, said Liz Schmidt, spokeswoman for the company.

"We wanted to get the land back on the tax rolls, and we've finally done that," Ryan said of the land that Infinite Campus has purchased. "With our population now at 57,000 and growing quickly, it is crucial for us to add businesses to our tax base."

Bryan Schafer, Blaine's director of planning and community development, said he and other officials have spoken with property owners whose land Vikings owner Zygi Wilf sought two years ago for a \$670 million stadium. Those landowners are still interested in selling their land, Schafer said.

One of the property owners, Joe Preiner, appears to be close to a deal. Preiner's 75 acres was considered the gateway to Wilf's proposed \$1.67 billion Northern Lights retail, sports and entertainment complex, but Preiner has had a long-standing legal dispute with Blaine, Anoka County and the Rice Creek Watershed District over what he calls "the controlled flooding" of his land.

But all sides recently agreed that a culvert in the area be lowered, allowing Preiner's land to drain, making it more enticing to buyers, he said. County and city officials told Preiner that the culvert will be lowered to 890 feet by Nov. 15.

"I've been in contact with a potential [land] buyer on a regular basis," Preiner said. "Some of the other property owners, who were going to sell to Wilf, are anxious to sell, too."

Blaine always planned for life without the Vikings, thanks, in part, to the plotting of Wood, the former city manager. But Wood's vision went beyond Blaine. When Ryan and other city officials learned that Wood had

applied for similar jobs in other cities, Ryan said he confronted Wood, a Texas native.

Wood left his \$139,000-a-year position on Aug. 2 by mutual agreement, Ryan said. Bob Therres, public service manager, has taken over the city manager's job on an interim basis.

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