

TEETERING IN THE BALANCE

For the proposed Wonderful World of Oz theme park, March 15 is a day of reckoning

By Yael T. Abouhalkah
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The Johnson County Commission soon is going to disappoint either the energetic supporters or the vigorous detractors of the Wonderful World of Oz theme park and housing development.

Both sides have reasons to hope for victory at the commission's meeting on March 15, when the members will make a decision that could alter forever Johnson County's future.

Critics of Oz offer sound arguments to kill the project.

It will always be difficult to trust Oz proponents, especially longtime leader Robert Kory, given their track record of shading the truth and misleading people. The tax breaks sought for the theme park and public infrastructure are excessive. And the very ideas of building a theme park and bringing in millions of tourists continue to annoy many Johnson County residents.

But Oz backers offer potentially legitimate reasons to move ahead with the project.

They have put together a state-approved cleanup plan for contaminated parts of the 9,000-plus acres at the old Sunflower Army Ammunition Plant. They contend that private investors ultimately will decide whether the Oz theme park gets built. And public bodies at the county, state and federal levels will have many opportunities after March 15 to pull the plug if the project stalls.

The passionate debate over this issue is understandable, given its size, the out-of-town status of the developers and the potential long-term effect on the community.

Richard Ferguson, chief executive officer of the Oz Entertainment Co., is aggressively seeking a "yes" vote from the commission.

"We have all the risk, and the benefits are shared," he says, repeating Oz's claim that millions of tax dollars eventually could flow to local cities, school districts and the county. "A 'no' vote kills us, and we don't think that's appropriate at all."

Part of his comment isn't accurate. The county is taking a risk because it could be missing a great opportunity to attract an even better development proposal for the site. And the county could be harmed if the theme park or commercial development section go belly up and the land remains idle for many years.



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Robert Kory, chairman of the Oz Entertainment Co., talked of his theme-park proposal in Los Angeles in 1999.

Bill Sheldon, president of Taxpayers Opposed To Oz, ticks off a long list of reasons — some conspiratorial in nature — to be suspicious of Kory, Ferguson and others involved in Oz.

"Why can't the people of Kansas look at other options?" Sheldon asks, in a refrain that makes sense when you realize the U.S. Army didn't conduct a fully open request for bids to redevelop the ammunition plant land.

Yet Sheldon and other opponents also don't give Oz backers enough credit for what they have done so far. They have spent millions of dollars getting private financial investment advice, securing rights to the Oz characters and changing their plans to conform to many, but not all, of the concerns raised by public bodies.

So we're back to square one: Is the Oz deal the best one for Johnson County as well as the rest of the metropolitan area?

Take a look at the three most favorable points Oz supporters have going for them.

The remediation plan could clean up the ammunition plant land more quickly than if the U.S. Army had planned to do the job and at less direct cost to taxpayers.

The involvement of private investors will be key to any success that the Oz development has. It makes some sense when Ferguson says, "That's the ultimate acid test for us: Are we loanable on Wall

Street?"

Sure, private investors have made mistakes before by buying bonds to support projects that ultimately fail. But the lack of interest by the private sector has killed huge development deals in the metropolitan area before, most notably the Power & Light District in downtown Kansas City last year.

And more safeguards exist to protect Johnson County taxpayers even if the commission lets Oz proceed on March 15.

The Kansas Development Finance Authority, congressional oversight members and the County Commission all will get more opportunities to say "no" to Oz if future problems develop.

True, Oz could claim it has gone so far that it can't be turned back at such a late date. But cities have stamped out faltering development projects before, in Johnson County and elsewhere, when developers have run out of chances to prove their project is viable.

Opponents do continue to have powerful ammunition of their own to try to prevent Oz from being approved.

The issue of trust can't be overstated. To this day, good questions exist about why Oz supporters thought over the years that they might be able to hide so many details from the public or act in ways that appeared duplicitous.

These actions included issuing misleading information on how much

school-tax revenue the project could create for the DeSoto School District and secretly trying to get DeSoto to take over a prime role in issuing bonds for the project.

If Oz dies this month, its supporters have been their own worst enemies almost every step of the way.

Oz opponents also score points when they say the tax breaks and public infrastructure improvements sought for the project are simply too costly for taxpayers.

Oz defenders have never understood that they could have greatly helped themselves with the public and with politicians by demanding far less in taxpayer assistance.

Finally, Oz critics make a point that resonates with a large number of Johnson County residents: They really don't want a theme park in their midst, bringing with it tourists and a huge, sprawling development near DeSoto.

"I haven't heard anybody say housing is a priority (in that part of the county)," says Sheldon.

Mix all of the pros and cons together and, come mid-March, the Oz decision could all be up to one person: Commissioner Susie Wolf.

She joined the commission after defeating Johnna Lingle in last year's election. Lingle had been one of the two votes against Oz when it stalled 2-2 in the commission last November.

Annabeth Surbaugh, the other opponent, sounds as if she's still in that camp. The two supporters, George Gross and Doug Wood, haven't changed their minds. Commissioner Gary Anderson abstains on Oz votes because of a potential conflict of interest.

Wolf could breathe the new life into Oz if she thinks the entire Oz economic development plan, revenues generated by the project and the land reclamation will make Johnson County a better place to live in the future.

Or, Wolf could help deadlock and possibly kill Oz by saying she doesn't trust its promoters and she thinks better reuse proposals could be obtained for the Sunflower site.

Johnson County residents deserve a decision at the commission's meeting on March 15.

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