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Austin Independent School District eyes sites for \$35M center

Mueller, University Park in the running

Austin Business Journal - by [Francisco Vara-Orta](#) ABJ Staff

Austin Independent School District has narrowed its search on where to build its long-awaited \$35 million performing arts center to two high-profile developments in Central Austin: one at the old Mueller airport and the other at the former Concordia University campus, sources close to the deal told the Austin Business Journal.

AISD officials declined an interview before leaving for spring break, saying the debate is ongoing in private meetings, but the agenda for the district's board of trustees meeting on March 22 indicates the center's location is slated for discussion. The item has been on the agenda for closed-door meetings repeatedly for months, and multiple sources have said that AISD is hoping to make a decision soon to adhere to the district's timeline to open the center in 2011.

Gregory Weaver, who is president of Catellus Development Group and heads the 711-acre Mueller redevelopment project, confirmed his company has submitted a proposal. But he declined to elaborate, saying, "The ball is in AISD's court."

Likewise, Andy Sarwal, lead developer of the \$750 million, 23-acre University Park project at the former Concordia campus, declined comment specifically on the matter, except to say he thinks there are several developers strongly interested in the project,

"We continue to be energized on a regular basis with new activity, and we welcome any opportunity for discussions with potential users that would complement the community-conscious and mixed-use nature of University Park," Sarwal said in an email.

As the project would be the first performing arts building designed to serve the entire district, AISD officials have said they want to centrally locate the building but are limited by what's available and affordable in or near downtown. While no formal plans have been released, AISD Assistant Planning Director Joe Silva told the Journal in 2008 that the district would like at least 10 acres, and would likely build a center with a 1,200- to 1,500-seat capacity.

According to background documents posted on AISD's Web site, criteria for the site selection include being able to accommodate future expansion, being near mass transit and offering possibilities for mixed-use development or joint use.

"While it may be odd to some that the district would choose to locate in a mixed-use development next to retail and housing, I think it shows that the district has taken a creative approach to finding a good central place while at the same time helping the city reuse its land," said Chris Crawford, vice president of Austin's land planning and landscape architectural firm RVi Planning + Landscape Architecture + Graphic Design, which is not involved in the deal.

AISD will pay for the center with funds from a \$343 million bond issue that voters approved in 2008 after the district said it didn't have a building large enough for some of its bigger events, such as graduations or theatrical performances. The district had been working on a proposal since the early 2000s.

Daniel Roth, principal at Southwest Strategies Group, is representing AISD in its search, and Pfluger Associates Architects is the architectural firm on the project.

Previously, the district had looked at building a performing arts center alongside the Long Center for the Performing Arts, but that deal fell through.

Long Center Executive Director Cliff Redd said one issue was that the district thought parking fees would be a problem for some lower-income students' families. Also, he said that in 2007, when Redd was in 10-month-long discussions with AISD and before the bond issue passed, the funding wasn't sufficient.

"We still have space for them to build here and welcome them with open arms, but what I most want to see is something central for the students built soon so they finally have a home to perform," Redd said. "It's been a long time coming."

Courtesy of JB Goodwin