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The events and meetings building at White Lodging's proposed The Farm at Crossroad Commons is shown at right in this rendering.

Growing support for The Farm

White Lodging lays out plans to chamber

ANDREW STEELE
andrew.steele@nwi.com,
219-933-3241

Members of the Crossroads Chamber of Commerce heard firsthand Tuesday the details of White Lodging's plan for the Region's most prominent crossroads.

Deno Yiankes and Douglas Nysse presented White Lodging's The Farm at Crossroad Commons to more than 150 chamber members at Avalon Manor in Hobart. Yiankes, president and CEO of White's investments and development division, and Nysse, vice president of development, described a \$350 million project at the intersection of Interstate 65 and U.S. 30.

The development would replace the former Radisson Hotel and Star Plaza Theatre, as well as the Twin Towers office buildings being demolished now, which stood at the site for roughly 40 years. Planning for the site began as the hotel and theater closed, but evolved substantially over the past couple of years, Yiankes said.

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Farm

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"It's not something we put together in the last 60 days," Yiankes said of the plan. "It's frankly something we started on a couple years ago."

But the groundwork for The Farm began eight or 10 years ago, Yiankes said, when he started discussing a replacement for the former Radisson Hotel, which executives believed had become functionally obsolete, with costly maintenance and declining room occupancy.

"Demand had dropped off quite a bit," Yiankes said. "It was not a hotel that justified putting more investment in."

But Dean White, patriarch of the White companies, did not want to see the Radisson go, Yiankes said, and resisted for several years. About three years ago, though, White changed his mind and told White Lodging executives to investigate replacing the hotel.

The plan

After engaging a land planner and thinking more about White's legacy in Northwest Indiana, the plan simply to replace the Radisson grew to become the mixed-use proposal on the table today. It includes an 83,500-square-foot meeting and event center, four hotels, 40 acres of farmland, 18 townhomes and 32 condominiums, a visitors center and greenhouse, an art gallery and studios, two restaurants and a microbrewery and distillery, an equestrian center and an underground parking lot with 1,300 spaces.

White Lodging intends to spend \$237 million to cover two-thirds of the project's cost. The company is asking for public support to cover the other third, including \$30 million in Tax Increment Financing proceeds from the town of Merrillville; \$75 million in proceeds from a 1 percent Lake County food and beverage tax; state innkeep-

ers tax revenue generated by the project for 25 years, an estimated \$18 million; and support of up to \$15 million from one of several potential state economic development programs.

Yiankes said the public-private partnership is necessary for the project to proceed.

"To even get to a mid-single digit return, we need this support," Yiankes said of White Lodging's proposed investment.

The company is projecting more than 1,000 new jobs directly and indirectly created by the project, as well as more than 600 construction jobs over three to five years. It's also projecting that, over a 10-year period, the full development would create \$96 million in property, sales, income and innkeepers tax revenue as well as \$650 million gross in new salaries and wages.

If the company doesn't get the public support, "there's no issue. We'll do something

that'll be very nice," he said. That likely would be a return to the original to build a new hotel.

Education and wellness

White Lodging officials are touting what they believe will be significant opportunities for The Farm as a center of activity that Merrillville currently lacks, and as an educational site that offers opportunities to promote public health and to promote the arts.

"We wanted to do something more than hospitality," Yiankes said.

Nysse noted the below-grade parking will make available more open space on the surface, some of which will be taken up by agricultural uses.

"It allows us to have farm-to-table dining on the property. It allows us to have a public market. It can be a focal point for the community," Nysse said. "We'll also

have riding trails."

And, "there's a strong interest in art being a focal point," he said.

"The educational part of it is a big deal," Yiankes said. "We envision this becoming a highly programmed area, not just when conventions or groups are in town."

In response to a question from Merrillville Community School Corp. Superintendent Nick Brown regarding internships and ongoing opportunities for students, Yiankes said, "We absolutely would be not only open to that, that would be a key driver of ours with the local high schools."

Yiankes also said White Lodging would like to expand its relationship with Purdue University, which hosts a hospitality program at its Northwest campus and an agricultural program in West Lafayette.

Andrew Kyles, a member of the Crossroads Chamber board of directors and a Crown Point city councilman, recalled the first time the White family developed the northwest quadrant of I-65 and U.S. 30.

"It's an amazing project," Kyles said of The Farm.

"It's almost like 1978 revisited — on a grander scale. It'll be an economic boon for the whole Region. It's future-oriented."

Next steps

Yiankes said company officials hope the amenities and programming in their proposal that go beyond a traditional convention center development will help convince public officials to support it. Yiankes said the intention is to draw new business into the Region.

"The key thing for us on that is, it's not just plopping down a conference center in the middle of an asphalt parking lot and saying, 'Build it and they will come,'" he said. "That, in our opinion, is not going to happen."

Yiankes said White Lodging hopes to have a good idea whether local support exists by the end of the year. White Lodging officials are scheduled to engage in a workshop Nov. 8 with the Lake County Council, which would need to approve a food and beverage tax.

The company would begin construction in 2019 if that support is received, Yiankes said.