

Brookfield plan makes arena heart of district

Discover Midway bid includes striking design for venue, subsidized homes



The Discover Midway plan includes 3,200 apartment homes in mid-rise towers lining the edge of the site. (Courtesy rendering)

BY JENNIFER VAN GROVE

San Diego's 55-year-old sports arena will stay in place but go from unremarkable to unmistakable, as envisioned in the Brookfield-and-friends site redevelopment plan submitted to city officials last week.

The Discover Midway proposal, which also calls for 3,280 apartment homes lining the periphery of the city's 48-acre property, advances the idea that the aging venue can be made exciting once again with an exoskeleton of sorts that transforms its monolithic style and singular function.

Opened in 1966, the current arena is operated by ASM Global. It has 16,000 seats and hosts around 145 sports and entertainment events in a typical year. The city-owned venue sits at the center of San Diego's real estate holdings at 3500, 3250, 3220 and 3240 Sports Arena Blvd.

The contiguous parcels are being [offered for lease](#) through a state-regulated disposition process to development teams that promise to reserve 25 percent of future housing units for lower-income households, and commit to renovating or replacing the arena.

"This is not your grandfather's sports arena," said Chuck Steedman, executive vice president for ASM Global, which is a part of the Discover Midway team. "What we've tried to do is open the arena up, keep the things that are great about it, which is the intimacy of the bowl ... and create significantly more fan-centric amenities."

That translates to more bathrooms, more concession stands, more space to move around — and more importantly, an attraction that serves more people more of the time.

"What we're planning is to turn the building itself into the vibrant, beating heart of the district," Steedman said.

The Discover Midway group is one of seven teams competing in a second solicitation process for the land that includes Pechanga Arena San Diego. Brookfield Properties won the first competitive bidding process before California's Department of Housing and Community Development intervened. The agency is tasked with enforcing the state's Surplus Land Act, which was amended in 2019 with more teeth to ensure that excess government-owned land is made available for affordable housing.

This time, San Diego is strictly following the state agency's rulebook for disposing of surplus land. Last week, the city closed the books on the second solicitation window. The seven applicants are now in a state-mandated, 90-day negotiation period that runs through March 4. San Diego officials have shared few details on how they plan to evaluate proposals, save for noting that the affordable housing and arena requirements are nonnegotiable.

Brookfield's latest pitch is substantially different than its first one — more homes, more greenery, less retail and an all-new office component. And, as would be expected, subsidized housing plays a starring role.

The [consortium](#), which includes affordable housing builders Affirmed Housing and National Community Renaissance (National CORE), is prepared to deliver between 820 and 1,050 housing units that are set aside for people making less than 60 percent of the area median income, or 25 percent to 32 percent of all units, depending on feedback from city officials. The group envisions erecting the deed-restricted units in mid-rise towers, up to eight stories high, that will accommodate families, seniors and veterans.

Discover Midway also plans to address a gap in the affordable marketplace: families with kids who need extra space but cannot afford a house. The proposal calls for more than 180 three-bedroom, rent-restricted units.

“There’s a huge need for three-bedroom (units),” said John Seymour, who is vice president of National CORE. “In San Diego, there’s mostly one- and two-bedroom apartment complexes.”

The balance of homes — between 2,230 to 2,460 units — will be market-rate units, meaning luxury apartments that can be rented to anyone at any price point.

Homes should work in concert with the proposed two, contemporary office towers offering 400,000 square feet of space, and a retail and entertainment district to create a dynamic community, said Jessica Jones, who is a senior director at Brookfield Properties and is based in San Diego.

“Brookfield is the largest owner and operator of office space in the world, so we are able to bring tenants like Google and Facebook here on site,” she said. “That’s going to be a big component to building this cohesive neighborhood where people can come and work and live and recreate.”

The plan’s entertainment district is anchored by the arena and its open concourse. Some of the arena’s food and beverage operators are intended to be open all of the time, and the venue’s articulated roof, which extends up to 20 feet from the base structure, is designed to double as shading for temporary vendors and markets, such as Kobey’s Swap Meet.

A two-story mercado building, just east of the arena, complements the outdoor marketplace with retail space for local merchants, artisans and community groups. In total, the group is proposing 150,000 square feet of retail space spread across the project.

Discover Midway’s primary park component, called the Mesa, is a mostly passive, elevated green space with ocean views located at the northwest corner of the site. It will feed into community areas with dog parks and playgrounds. A pedestrian bridge would connect the project to the San Diego River Trail and other parts of the Midway District, Jones said.

The plan also includes visitor parking, concentrated in garages, and residential parking in above-grade, podium structures.

As proposed, the dense project, like others in the running for the site, includes a number of buildings that tower over the Midway District's 30-foot height limit. San Diego voters last year struck down the restriction by removing the Midway-Pacific Highway Community Plan from the city's coastal zone. However, the ballot-box victory could soon be voided by a legal challenge seeking to block taller buildings in the 1,324-acre area.

jennifer.vangrove

@[sduniontribune.com](mailto:jennifer.vangrove@sduniontribune.com)

Twitter: @jbruin