

Entertainment TIF district gets county go-ahead

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EDITOR

Cleveland County's commissioners met Friday in a special meeting to approve an "Economic Development Agreement" with the city of Norman regarding the proposed Rock Creek Entertainment District.

The Cleveland County Recreational and Entertainment Facilities Trust unanimously approved the agreement with the city of Norman, the University of Oklahoma, Norman Tax Increment Finance Authority, UNP North LLC, and the Cleveland County Recreational and Entertainment Facilities Authority to begin work on the proposed tax increment finance district, including the arena for the University of Oklahoma.

The Trust includes Chairman Jacob McHughes, Vice Chairman Rod Cleveland, and Rusty Grissom, Larry Naifeh and Steve McDaniels.

The meeting lasted less than five minutes and had no public comments, as under state law it was a "special meeting."

David Floyd, an attorney for the trust, said the agreement approval is a formality that began in September following

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Citizens fill the council chambers during the City Council meeting on the TIF for University North Park last summer. Cleveland County will now begin the first steps to implement an agreement between the city and the county regarding the TIF.

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the narrow vote to approve the TIF by the Norman City Council.

"The trust just needed to formally authorize the chairman to sign the agreement," Floyd said. "So, that's all that it does, is formalize the signature for a document that's already out there."

However, organizers for the TIF petition for a citywide vote said the approval was far from a formality. While the petition was struck down in district court recently, the group announced it was appealing almost immediately following the ruling by Cleveland County District Judge Jeff Virgin.

Petition attorney Rob Norman said that appeal will be filed sometime next week. He said the agreement, including the one being signed by the commissioners, would “stand or fall” on the outcome of that appeal at the Oklahoma State Supreme Court.

”The city adopted this agreement the same night they adopted the ordinance,” Norman said. “This all will ultimately stand or fall on what happens with the appeal. Regardless of what they did today, if we win the appeal, there’s no economic development.”

Paul Arcaroli, organizer for the petition, said the commission is going against the will of voters by approving the agreement. Arcaroli said he believes the recent election sent a strong message that the city wants to vote on the TIF, not just go with the city council’s 5-4 vote in September.

“The commissioners shouldn’t be so tone deaf,” Arcaroli said. “We know that the mayor lost his race. We know that those who supported it in the council lost their races. We know 11,000 people signed a petition for this. And again, we know that this is highly unpopular. But they’re really supporting it. They could have deferred it, at least until the appeal.”

However, Scott Martin, president and CEO of the Norman Chamber of Commerce, said the TIF represents a good way for Norman to move forward

with large economic developments without raising taxes. He spoke of the The Rainier Companies’ interest in the Rock Creek development.

“In this case, we actually have a private developer who is prepared and excited to invest nearly \$1 billion in our community of private dollars, so that’s a real uptick, a real upside to this project,” Martin said. “We actually have a developer that’s willing to invest the private capital to make this happen. Look at where we might want to utilize others for financing. I hope they’ll be similar private sector engagement because that’s really the secret sauce that makes all of this work.”

Commissioner Rod Cleveland said the county did have to adopt the measure according to their agreement with the city, but also that he supports the project.

“It’s a good project. It’s a good project for the community,” Cleveland said. “It’s a good project for the University of Oklahoma. It is what they, the athletics department, wanted to do, but they wanted to have a public arena for the public use, and everything, and then they will participate in that public use. It’s for the community.”

Russell Rice, who is also an organizer for the public vote petition, said Cleveland and other commissioners who are supporting the TIF will likely be unhappy with the eventual outcome if the public is allowed to vote. He said the quick vote is an attempt by the county to throw support behind the developers.

”A few of us today think that this is going to be an embarrassment,” Rice said.