



NCBR Article (Northern Colorado Business Report)

RAINFOREST in the desert
By Tom Hacker

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GREELEY - An indoor rainforest and aviary that would soar nearly seven stories above the Arizona desert floor is the next project on Greeley businessman and former oil company executive David Calvin's plate.

Paradise Earth, as the project is called, has been years in the planning and is now headed toward a groundbreaking next year, once Calvin and his project team chooses from among four sites in metropolitan Phoenix that are under consideration. That decision is expected within the next six weeks.

Estes Park architect Roger Thorp, whose firm has worked with Calvin Enterprises on the St. Michael's Town Square development in west Greeley, said he was at work on final designs for Paradise Earth.

"It's very real," Thorp said. "We've signed the contract to go ahead and design the building. Even though we don't have a fixed site yet, there's a lot of work that can be done, and needs to be done, before we get down to that level."

Calvin declined an interview invitation for this story, even though he had issued a press release in the Phoenix area that spawned a story in the Arizona Republic, the state's largest daily newspaper.

Multiple messages

Paradise Earth also has a fully developed Web site with numerous photos, video clips, a 3-D animation of the architectural design, and Calvin's statement of his mission in pursuing the plan.

In the Arizona Republic story, Calvin described an 80,000-square-foot rainforest habitat with a floor the size of a football field that would harbor dozens of species of wildlife, predominantly birds. A glass enclosure with a 65-foot ceiling would feature climate controls producing a true rainforest environment.

"I want to recreate every aspect of the rainforest, like we've scooped out a piece of it and put it in Arizona," Calvin said in a Web-posted mission statement for the project. "Paradise Earth will be more than an aviary, and a vastly different experience from being in a zoo."

The project would also include a conference center that would accommodate 1,000 guests for educational programs, and would be offered free to environmental groups.

Formidable resources

Calvin said he was prepared to spend \$25 million on the project, and would not seek investors or incentives to build it.

The resources that back the rainforest project are formidable. Calvin in 1985 began building his oil production company, Bataa Oil Inc., into Colorado's largest independent oil company, with 350 wells. He sold Bataa to Merit Energy in 2001 for about \$60 million.

Since then, Calvin has been pursuing real estate development projects in Northern Colorado and Arizona. St. Michael's Town Square in Greeley is quickly filling with retail, restaurant and office tenants.

The Kierland Corporate Center in Scottsdale, Ariz., is in its second phase of class A office development. Calvin had purchased the four-story, 110,000-square-foot first phase of the Kierland project for \$21 million in 2001.

Calvin has also in the past few years built the 20,000-square-foot Colorado Bird Sanctuary and Education Center near his home in west Greeley, and makes it available to hospice and educational groups.

But the Paradise Earth project would dwarf any other aviary in the United States, and its rainforest replication would make it unique.

"We looked all over for a comparable project, and couldn't come up with one," Thorp said.

Audubon aboard

Calvin has met with numerous conservation groups during the planning process, including the top two organizers of Audubon Arizona, the state chapter of the worldwide conservation group, at a June fundraiser where he presented them with a \$1,000 donation on behalf of Paradise Earth.

Audubon Arizona executive director Sam Campana said that while she had not been asked for a specific endorsement of the project, she and her membership supported its role in providing a potential lifeboat for threatened bird species.

"Audubon is obviously interested in anything bird-related, and I was heartened

by the science that is behind this project," she said, adding that the economic and educational benefits the project offered were also attractive.

"To me, as a former mayor of Scottsdale, it's very exciting," Campana said. "I know what kind of a plus that would be for the valley."

But some conservation group critics have said they are skeptical of any project that encloses wild animals in a captive environment.

Paradise Earth team members say conservation, and education about the crucial role rainforests play on the planet, are the core purposes of the project, and that its immense scope could make it a rare example of a successful captive breeding habitat.

"I know that David wants to emphasize bird species that are endangered," Thorp said. "The idea is to make this large enough that these species will hopefully breed in this environment. That's the challenge with other aviaries."

Thorp said the construction timetable for Paradise Earth, beginning in early 2008, would take just under two years, with the logistics of importing and installing mature rainforest vegetation accounting for much of it.

"We're not talking about saplings," Thorp said. "We're going to be bringing in mature plant life. ... This is certainly the largest project we have ever taken on."