

Businesses

eye planned cargo hub

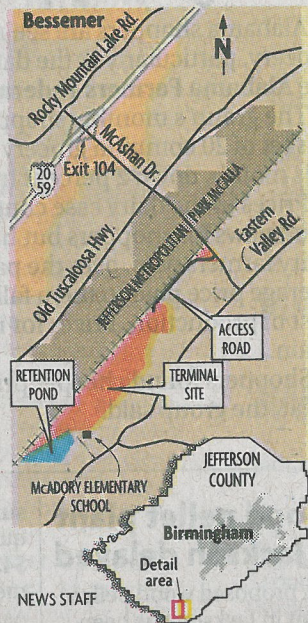
BY MICHAEL TOMBERLIN
News staff writer

Norfolk Southern's planned \$112 million cargo-loading hub in McCalla already is spurring interest from companies that might set up operations near the site, officials said.

"With the facility still being a couple of years away, I think the early interest is people recognizing it as a very strong project with a lot of opportunities," Dave Mickey, spokesman for the Birmingham Business Alliance, said Thursday.

The spillover effect of Norfolk Southern's planned railroad hub is one reason the project was pursued by economic development officials, despite opposition that's flared up in recent days from residents living near the site in McCalla.

Norfolk Southern, which announced the plans last week, intends to break ground on the project early next year, with completion scheduled in 2012. The facility on 316 acres near the McAdory Elementary School will take cargo containers from trucks and load them onto trains.



The hub is expected to create thousands of jobs if distribution companies set up operations nearby, prompting members of the Jefferson County Economic and Industrial Development Authority to set up a land acquisition committee at a Thursday meeting.

"It seems clear the land next to the McCalla park is

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CARGO: Forum set for Aug. 18

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going to be in great demand," said Charles McPherson, a board member and a member of the new committee. "We should probably be acting now."

The authority manages the 739-acre JeffMet McCalla, which sits across the tracks from the planned Norfolk Southern hub. The park is already home to an OfficeMax distribution center, and Home Depot has completed construction on a \$33 million distribution center that will begin operating this year.

The authority has sold 355.5 acres in JeffMet McCalla for projects, and 136 of the remaining acres are unusable wetlands. That leaves the park with 247 acres left to market.

The authority has more than \$1 million it can use for land purchases, executive

ID THEFT: Man had to change name

had obtained his personal information to begin buying goods.

"They had gotten traffic tickets in my name and

director Carma Jude told board members at the Thursday meeting.

Ronnie Acker, chairman of the authority board, peppered Norfolk Southern official Mike Grim with questions at Thursday's meeting. Acker, who also is president of the Bessemer Area Chamber of Commerce, wanted answers to concerns raised by McCalla residents regarding the facility.

He asked Grim, the company's industrial development manager for Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana, how many other areas the railroad considered before selecting the McCalla site. Grim said the company looked as far northeast as Ashville and as far east as Lincoln, and at industrial sites in Irondale and elsewhere.

Grim said site consultants identified southwest of Birmingham as the best area to consider. After exploring their options on three different McCalla sites, the 316-acre tract adjacent to the railroad tracks was deemed best, he said.

is usually the peak sales month of the year," Brander
ure for any month in 2009.
Factoring out foreclosure
while the housing market is
improving, it remains far

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Acker also raised concerns over traffic, especially trucks on McAshan Drive to the Interstate 20/59 interchange.

Grim said the railroad plans to conduct a traffic count study on McAshan to aid officials with any improvement plans. Portions of the road are maintained by Jefferson County, others by the city of Bessemer and another by the state. Grim said the company is already giving thought to ways to prevent trucks from turning right toward the narrow, residential-heavy Eastern Valley Road as they leave the facility at McAshan.

Grim reiterated the company's plans to build berms and use landscaping to make the facility invisible to neighbors and help prevent noise and light from being a nuisance.

He said the property is currently zoned for agricultural use, but the railroad will not have to go through zoning changes because it falls under federal regulations, not local statutes.

Another main concern expressed by citizens is the proximity of the site to McAdory Elementary School.

Norfolk Southern officials met with Jefferson County school Superintendent Phil Hammonds and McAdory Elementary Principal Charlene McMurry on Thursday afternoon. Hammonds asked for the meeting Monday after a map in The Birmingham News on July 11 showed the intermodal site's proximity to the school.

"I feel better in the sense that we now have some facts," Hammonds said after the meeting.

He said his office has received several calls from concerned parents, including the head of the school's PTA.

Hammonds urged all parents and citizens to attend a planned meeting with Norfolk Southern on Aug. 18 to talk about their concerns. A location for the meeting has yet to be determined.

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ico, but he is unsure how the crime unfolded or what happened to the homes fraudulently purchased using his name. He doesn't

offering keyboarding lessons to kids between 5 and 13 years old and creating a pair of dog mascots that promote the importance of