

## Osceola Heritage Park plans for major sports expansion

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New hotels are just one element of the longterm master plan for Osceola Heritage Park.

Don Miers, the county's director of sports facilities, told **GrowthSpotter** that for months, county planners have "been dabbling with different concepts of what a master plan could look like."

The 168-acre park on U.S. 192 houses the 11,000-seat arena, the Houston Astros training facility, an agricultural center, a 90,000-square-foot exhibit hall and multiple recreational fields.



A conceptual master plan calls for a convention center hotel with parking deck, extensive retail and 8 new ball fields at Osceola

The plan, created by Atkins, includes a major expansion of the sports facilities. The park's limited number of ballfields (6) and commissioners' refusal to build a new stadium in 2013 led to OCH losing its two biggest tenants: the Houston Astros and the [U.S. Specialty Sports Association](#).

Both are relocating to other parts of Florida, though the Astros will [train in Kissimmee](#) through 2016.

The conceptual plan calls for eight new regulation ballfields, four infield practice fields, batting cages and two pitching/catching areas with 16 mounds. Osceola County Stadium would also be upgraded with more seating, a new outfield restaurant and luxury suites.

The plan would bring the total number of full-sized fields to 13, including the stadium, which would be enough to accommodate two Major League Baseball teams for spring training and amateur sporting events throughout the year.

"That was our dream layout if we were ever able to convince two MLB teams to come here," Miers told **GrowthSpotter**. He said the field sizes and configuration could change if the county fails to lure another Major League Baseball team to Kissimmee.

"It's a long shot," he said. "We're geographically challenged. We developed it internally just to show what we could do if we could get two teams to relocate. But if not, it can be adapted to amateur size fields."

Miers said he'll know by the end of the year if the Astros will exercise their option to stay in Kissimmee for 2017. It depends on whether their new stadium in Palm Beach is finished.

The Atlanta Braves are in negotiations with a St. Petersburg group to move their spring training headquarters to the Tampa Bay area. "That's far from a done deal," Miers said. "I don't know how the (Tampa Bay) Rays feel about tax money going to that when they need a new stadium."

Miers said he has had discussions with the Milwaukee Brewers and with the two Ohio teams - the Cleveland Indians and Cincinnati Reds. "They have a beautiful complex, but they don't draw anyone because people from Ohio don't go to Arizona for vacation."

He knows luring any of the teams to Kissimmee is a long shot. "That's one reason we haven't even presented (the master plan) yet to the commissioners," he said. "It might never get approved, but there's no sense in marching forward until the few teams with leases coming to an end decide what they want to do."

Miers and Bill Martin, the county's economic development director, have both been working to find a replacement tenant for USSSA.

"There's quite a bit of interest in the sporting side of it," Martin said. "I've had discussions with three groups that are interested in a combination of baseball, softball and soccer. One group is interested in seeing if they could use the exhibition center for basketball. There's a lot of pent-up demand for sporting facilities."

An amphitheater would be built just west of the arena building. "The thinking there was that if [Runaway Country](#) is a big success here in March, we could draw a lot of music festivals and concerts," Miers said.

Relocating the park's stormwater ponds across the street at Judge Farms frees up space for restaurant and retail development throughout the property. The internal road network would be rebuilt and interconnected by a series of roundabouts.

For now, the county's top priority is getting the hotel development going at the park. The county's procurement staff soon will be posting a request of letters of interest from hotel groups to build up to three hotels including a full-service convention hotel adjacent to the exhibit hall. The master plan shows a parking garage with 900 spaces to serve the facility.

A second, upper midscale hotel could be located on a 3-4 acre site at the intersection of Fortune Road and US 192. The third site would be across US 192 on the Judge Farm property that will be home to the [Florida Advanced Research and Manufacturing Center](#). This hotel is conceived as an upscale conference hotel for executives working with the research and manufacturing businesses at Judge Farms and surroundings areas. Other plan highlights include an expanded convention center linking the existing exhibition hall to Silver Spurs Arena.

"This is for real," Martin said. "I've gotten calls about the hotel sites."

A fourth hotel site could soon be available across U.S. 192 from Heritage Park. Bryan Judge, who sold 540 acres of his family's property to the county for the research park, retained 16 acres at the main entrance. He has applied to rezone the land for commercial development and told GrowthSpotter he would subdivide it to accommodate a limited-service hotel and multiple restaurants.

"We'll sell the whole thing if we can find a developer," he said.

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