



Odyssey ends in Bass Pro land deal

By Christine Perez and Sandra Zaragoza, Staff Writers

The developer behind a planned \$50 million retail development in Garland is kicking off construction after completing its acquisition of 28 acres along the shores of Lake Ray Hubbard.

Anchored by a 120,000-square-foot Bass Pro Shops-Outdoor World store, plans for Harbor Point include six lakeside restaurants, a boardwalk, courtesy docks and a 200-room hotel.



The land acquisition marks the end of a long odyssey that began in 1999 and involved the assemblage of six different tracts. Real estate broker **David English** of **Colliers International**, who put the deal together, said the transaction's closing is a tribute to the tenacity of the key players involved.

"There were many times when this deal could have fallen apart," he said. "If anyone -- the landowners, the developer, the city, Bass Pro -- would have lost heart and backed away, this whole thing would have crumbled."

English grew up near White Rock Lake but spent his weekends near Rockwall, where his family owned a 700-acre ranch. Ten years ago, he moved his own family out to the area, buying a house on 7 acres in McLendon-Chisholm in the southern part of Rockwall County.

He got into the real estate business in the mid-1980s, leasing shopping centers and selling retail assets. About six years ago, his focus shifted to land assemblage.

Around that same time, English became interested in the property along Lake Ray Hubbard. Wanting to take a closer look, he did what he usually does when he wants to get the lay of the land: he saddled up his horse, Red.

"I see a lot of my land tracts off Red's back," English said. "It's more fun and I get better views."

What he saw in Garland, he said, was simply breathtaking.

"The land had views no other site in the Metroplex could offer," he said. "Riding on my horse through the site, it was easy to see what could emerge."

But before English could begin to market the property he had to get to know the landowners, gain their trust and convince them to sell.

It wasn't easy. All had owned their parcels for 35 years or more. They had managed to hold onto their tracts during the early 1980s, when many of their neighbors had become embroiled in a land-flipping scandal, mostly involving developer Danny Faulkner.

Faulkner was eventually convicted for his role in the theft of more than \$100 million from five failed thrifts. He served close to four years in jail before being released in late 1988.

English started with John Williams, who owned the choicest lot -- 8 acres along the lake known as "the point." Williams, who had owned his land for 40 years, greeted babyfaced English with suspicion.

"A lot of brokers had approached us in the past with all kinds of ideas, even riverboat gambling, but the deals all fell apart," Williams said. "There's a real long stretch between dreaming and reality."

Eventually, Williams said he was persuaded by English's earnestness and apparent love of the land. The broker began marketing the property in 2000.

Knowing a larger parcel would be more compelling to developers, English also went to work on convincing adjacent property owners to join the party. By 2003, he had lined up six ownership groups that held a combined 28 acres.

"Developers that have talent and know-how aren't going to put a lot of time and effort into smaller deals," he said. "The payoff doesn't justify the work."

Around the same time, the lakeside site began to attract the interest of Blaine Lee with Dallas-based Harvest Partners. Lee and the other two principals at Harvest, Eliot Barnett and Tod Rubel, have built millions of square feet of retail space over the last 20 years, including many waterfront projects in California and Florida.

Lee and English hooked up and the two of them began trying to work out a deal. The initial concept was to build high-end apartments and retail shops on the site. They soon were summoned to a meeting with Greg Sims, vice president of the Garland Economic Development Partnership, who had heard about their ideas for the property.

"You need to think bigger," he told them. "We have grander plans."

The vision

The type of development Sims had in mind was similar to the well-known Kemah Boardwalk development along the Houston Ship Channel. English and Lee caught the vision, and Lee drew up new plans.

The trio knew they needed a "bell-cow" tenant, Lee said. They packed up their drawings and photos and took a trip to Springfield, Mo., to visit the No. 1 prospect on their list -- Bass Pro.

The retailer had opened up a store near Grapevine Mills mall in 1999. The Garland team knew it was a stretch for Bass Pro to consider putting two of its massive stores in one metropolitan market, but as it turned out, a second Dallas-Fort Worth location was already on the company's mind. The idea of building the store on a freshwater lake was an added bonus. Courtesy docks would allow people to park their boats and visit the store and would give Bass Pro customers a way to test-drive boats and other watercraft.

After Bass Pro CEO Johnny Morris traveled to Garland and toured the site, he was convinced, and serious negotiations got under way.

The next step was getting Garland voters to approve a \$24 million bond package to fund infrastructure development of the project, which happened with relative ease last May. Working out approvals of the design plans -- and getting the six different property ownership groups to agree to financial terms -- took a little longer, finally wrapping up Feb. 22.

Sims said Harbor Point will "put Garland on the map as a regional entertainment and shopping center."

"We think it's going to be a tremendous catalyst for the growth of our I-30 lake corridor," he said.

Harvest Partners will immediately begin construction, with the Bass Pro store on track to open in late summer or fall of 2006. The developer has a waiting list of restaurants interested in the six lakeside spots and has collected several letters of intent. After all of the challenges the Harvest has overcome in getting to this point, Lee said the company is being picky about tenant selection.

"We're looking for a high-energy entertainment and dining mix," he said. "Besides the Islamorada Fish Co. restaurant Bass Pro is putting in, we're talking to a high-end steakhouse, a very high-end Mexican restaurant, a high-end barbecue restaurant and an Italian restaurant. We also want to put in some type of sports bar venue."

"There'll be about 16,000 square feet of small-shop retail space, and there are four outparcels along I-30 we're just starting to market," Lee said. "Now that all of the hard work has been done, this project should move very quickly." As for English, he said the closing of the land deal has been bittersweet.

It's done now and the developers are taking over; it's the end of a long, fun ride," he said. "In the real estate business there are two types of brokers: guys who are commission-collectors and guys who like to build value. Ten or 20 years from now, I'll be able to drive by Harbor Point with my children and grandchildren and feel good about what we accomplished."