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Oxford on the Blue gains tax abatement support and now heads to the Kansas City Council

BY MARK DAVIS - THE KANSAS CITY STAR

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A property tax abatement for Oxford on the Blue, a proposed 350-acre biotech office park in south Kansas City, gained a favorable city vote Wednesday.

The five-member Planning, Zoning and Economic Development Committee unanimously advanced the tax break proposal to the Kansas City Council for a vote Thursday, with a recommendation to approve it.

Wednesday's vote means the City Council will weigh the abatement at the same time it considers zoning and planning changes Oxford on the Blue has requested.

"When they have a unanimous recommendation from the committee, it usually goes through," said Whitney Kerr Sr., a prominent real estate broker who has worked on the project for its owner, James E. Stowers III.

An abatement of the property taxes means Oxford on the Blue would not face larger tax bills even as the value of the property increases from the construction of buildings.

Oxford on the Blue seeks a 100 percent tax abatement for 10 years and a 50 percent abatement for the following 15 years.

The project is north of 87th Street between Interstates 435 and 71. It is near the heavily tax-incentive-supported Cerner Corp. Three Trails office and mixed use project on the former Bannister Mall site.

Exact amounts and terms of any tax abatement at Oxford on the Blue would be determined separately for each building project through the Planned Industrial Expansion Authority.

“It’s my hope that the first few need more tax abatement than the later ones and the final ones none at all,” committee chairman Ed Ford said at the session.

Rianna Deselich, with the South Kansas City Alliance, said that group was excited about the project but not the idea of “taking money away from the schools for 25 years.”

An abatement means three school districts — Hickman Mills, Center and Raytown — would miss out on the additional revenue that development of the site without the abatement would bring.

Committee member John Sharp countered that the property generated only about \$11,400 in property taxes last year.

“That’s nothing. ... It’s a rounding error,” Sharp said. “If we don’t give these incentives, that would probably continue for the foreseeable future.”

Mike White, an attorney for Oxford’s owner, said the project has spurred interest in other developments in the area.

Others said these won’t ask for or receive tax abatement.

Businesses that locate at Oxford on the Blue still will be assessed personal property tax, for example on computer equipment. Current property taxes would continue to be paid.

Stowers acquired most of the property in early 2007. He has been active in several ventures since leaving American Century Investments, where he had been chief executive of the mutual fund company until 2004.

He envisions a biotech office park and wants the tax abatement to make it easier to attract research firms, clinical trial facilities and other operations to the site.

The Star’s Lynn Horsley contributed to this report.

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