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## Irving Eyes Summer Start for \$125M CVB Center

By [Connie Gore](#)

IRVING, TX-The Irving Convention & Visitors Bureau, armed with a totally revamped plan, expects work to start in late summer on a \$125-million project. The 250,000-sf final design will be unveiled to council in late June or early July, with work slated to get underway shortly thereafter.

The [convention center project](#), in one form or another, has been on the city's "to do" list since 1999. A fall 2010 opening is now within reach. The revised plan for the city's 40-acre tract will plant a 250,000-sf convention center on the north side as phase one and a \$50-million-plus concert venue with 3,500 seats and additional parking on the south side as phase two. The tract's interior is expected to hold roughly 150,000 sf of retail and two hotels. The development site is bounded by Texas 114 on the west, Northwest Highway on the north, Las Colinas Boulevard on the east and Fuller Drive on the south.

"It has been completely reinvented," Maura Allen Gast, executive director of the city's convention and visitors' bureau, tells GlobeSt.com. "When we put it back on the front burner, the marketplace had changed. The world had changed."

An attached convention center hotel is long gone from the design, which has been "right sized" and a 1,000-space parking garage, estimated to cost \$30 million, incorporated into the 15-acre piece earmarked for the convention center. The new design has 50,000 sf of exhibit space, 20,000-sf ballroom and 20 break rooms, each 1,000 sf. The break-room emphasis is aimed at providing space for corporate functions like shareholders' meetings.

Irving's Las Colinas submarket has long been favored by corporate America as the place to set up headquarters and Southwest regional shops. City leaders, like CRE brokers and owners, like to tout the location beside Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport as well as the pro-business attitude and possible incentives from all government levels. "We expect there will be a lot of corporate use because of the environment that we're in," Gast says.

Gast says city leaders are in talks with prospective development partners for the entertainment, hospitality and retail components. "The city has a number of options on its plate," she says. "The city should be able to move onto the next phase later this summer. There's been a lot of interest [from developers.]"

Gast says the city, acting as developer, is keeping all options open as it weighs the build-out plan. The tract's northern piece is ticketed to be bisected by a light-rail line. If the plan stays intact, the station will be built across the street from the convention center, on land owned by Houston-based Hines and Dallas-based Trammell Crow Co.

The UK-based RMJM Hillier's Princeton, NJ team has designed the convention center to meet base level LEED certification, according to Gast. Austin Commercial will be the general contractor. Dallas-based Beck Group is overseeing construction and design for the city. Philadelphia-based SMG is holding a five-year agreement to manage and operate the facility, including the kitchen and catering service. SMG's 47-employee staff will office in convention center space as will Gast's

26 team members as part of the new strategy. The team is targeting meetings, conventions and civic functions for 800 to 1,200 people although the facility's capacity could accommodate 4,000 attendees.

The city's till has been banking a 2% hotel tax since 2000 to fund the convention center project. Another 2% tax was approved last November to finance the concert venue. Gast says the city's paid \$3 million to \$4 million in cash for the upfront costs, but the plan to sell bonds in late summer or early fall to finance the balance of the development.

"By waiting, we've ended up with a much better product," Gast stresses. "It's right-sized. It's rightly thought out. And, we're being very true to what our product is and who we are."

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