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Tulane secures ex-casino property

It plans to develop river research center

By Greg Thomas
Business writer

It's a deal.

Tulane University will buy 150,000 square feet of property under the former River City Casino on the riverfront from **Midtown Group** of Miami for \$1.3 million, completing assemblage of about seven acres of land for its long-planned \$60 million RiverSphere project, a museum and research center dedicated to the Mississippi River.

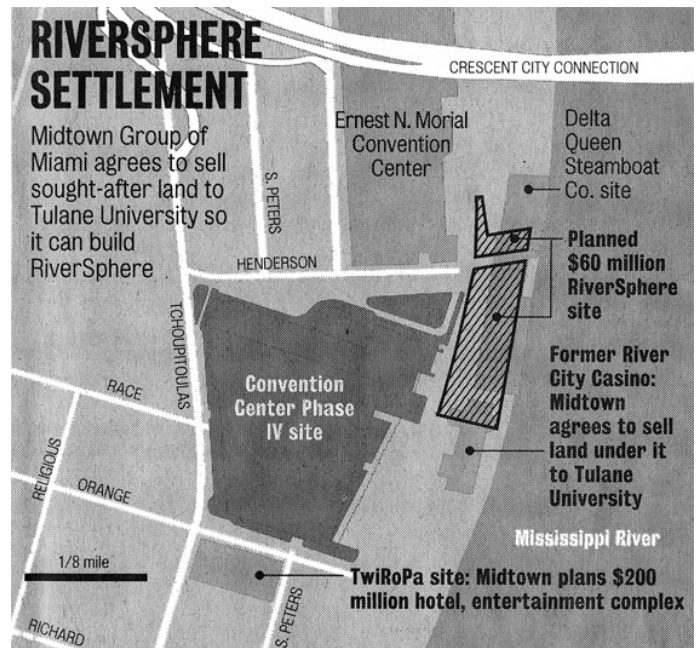
Tulane lost a chance to buy the site at a closed auction Aug. 3, stopping at a bid of \$1 million. At that point, Midtown outbid a third bidder and ended up with the property for \$1.3 million, Midtown, represented by Tamra "T.J." Fisher and her husband, Stuart "Neil" Fisher, was in a position to demand more money from Tulane, as well as additional money for a sliver of the site desired by the Ernest N. Morial Exhibition Hall Authority for its planned expansion of the Morial Convention Center.

But Midtown did not seek to profit from the sale, saying it was protecting the site from being sold to a speculator.

Anthony Lorino, Tulane University's senior vice president of operations, said Midtown offered the site for exactly what the Miami firm bid on the property, and Tulane accepted the offer from Neil Fisher on Thursday afternoon. Tulane will close on the property by Sept. 2, Lorino said. Lorino said the deal was between only Tulane and Midtown.

Lorino also said Tulane will accommodate the Convention Center's need for 4,000 square feet of the site.

The site is the home of the former two-boat casino that operated for nine weeks in 1995 and then closed. Businessman Joseph Canizaro ended up with most of the site, and Bank One, through foreclosure, ended up with about one-third of the property under the 200,000-square-foot River City casino dockside buildings.



STAFF PHOTO

Canizaro's property, about one-third under the riverfront buildings and the remaining five acres of land running downriver from the casino site, donated the land to Tulane.

After Midtown won the River City land in the auction and announced it planned a mixed-use development on the site, some observers thought the Tulane project faced a problem. Midtown has in the past bought disputed property and resold it for a much higher price.

However, Midtown executive Michael Samuel, through a spokesman, said the group decided to do "the right thing" and sell the property to Tulane. Samuel said RiverSphere would complement his company's \$200 million hotel, residential and entertainment complex planned for property elsewhere along Tchoupitoulas Street, not far from the River City site.

Tulane, however, will have to pay 13 percent of the sales price in commissions. The auction house gets 7 percent for its commission, while local broker Dorian Bennett of Dorian M. Bennett Realtors Inc. will receive 6 percent. Bennett will split his portion by giving 2 percent to a second unidentified broker, a spokesman for Midtown said. Midtown would have paid the same commission if it had closed on its purchase of the property.

Midtown, meanwhile, is focusing on developing a city block anchored by 1544 Tchoupitoulas, where TwiRoPa Mills Arts & Entertainment LLC operates a popular music venue in a sprawling 19th century former rope plant. Midtown plans a \$200 million development near the site, including hotel, residential, retail and entertainment components. The music venue would continue to operate at the site, a Midtown spokesman said.

Midtown executives said they would have developed the River City site if Tulane had not accepted its offer. That could have proven problematic, however, as the Dock Board, the regulatory authority of the Port of New Orleans, must approve any use or construction because of its century-old maritime servitude rights. The Dock Board is on record supporting Tulane's planned RiverSphere project.

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