

MIKE NICHOLS - IN MY OPINION

If we build it, they will come, says Cabela's

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Forget PabstCity.

It was estimated that PabstCity, had it been approved by the Milwaukee Common Council last week, might have drawn 2 million or 3 million visitors per year - depending who was reading the tea leaves.

Representatives of Cabela's, the sporting and outdoor goods juggernaut considering a 170,000-square-foot "store" at the confluence of Highways 41 and 45 in Washington County, have already said they could draw 3 million minimum - a number that makes you suspect they have been drinking a lot of what Pabst was once selling.

The thing is, folks in other states where Cabela's has planted itself insist it's actually a pretty sober estimate.

John Patterson, president of the Monroe County Convention & Tourism Bureau in Michigan, where Cabela's opened a big store in 2000, calls the place a "godsend."

"Anything that you can do in any community that is going to attract the number of people that does," says Patterson, "how could you call it anything less?"

Patterson had just started his job when Cabela's announced it was coming to Dundee, which is in Monroe County. He didn't know much about it - but quickly found out.

"You'd have sworn Disney was coming to town," he said.

And in a way it was. Cabela's is more than a retailer. The stores have been known to include everything from stocked aquariums to enormous faux "mountains" to wild game trophy rooms and gun libraries to museum-quality taxidermy.

"Oh, my God," said Patterson, "this is hunter's heaven."

The first week Cabela's opened in Dundee, he says, he walked through the parking lot and counted license plates from 48 of the 50 states. He actually believes an estimate bandied about in the press that as many as 6 million visitors hit that store on an annual basis.

The number - more than 16,000 visitors per day - invites skepticism.

Patterson insists, however, the real number is "probably as good or better than that."

"Cabela's," he contends, "is the number one tourist attraction in the state of Michigan."

The state has no way to verify that, according to its tourism department. But there's no doubt Cabela's stores are uniquely popular.

Cabela's really is a "mecca for sportsmen," says Dave Remick, a principal at Mercanti Group, a Minneapolis-based investment bank that tracks purveyors of outdoor merchandise.

A Cabela's in Owatonna, Minn., he said, is the No. 2 tourist attraction in that state, second only to the Mall of America.

The stores have an extremely strong following built up, he said, through the company's catalog business. And they are "extremely well capitalized."

"They do drive traffic," he said. "It is something (people) will drive hundreds of miles to go to once or twice a year."

Popular spots

Just how many visitors a store in Washington County would draw is, of course, conjecture. State Rep. Sue Jeskewitz says the company has told her between 3 million and 5 million and she, for one, doesn't doubt it.

Cabela's is so popular, she says, that big hotels like Sheraton often follow the stores.

Cabela's typically builds near highways outside of major cities and has also been known to build on highly visible hills - which is where it would be in Washington County.

Cabela's has options to buy up to 60 acres in the triangle formed by state Highway 145 and U.S. Highways 41 and 45, an area that includes parts of both the Town of Richfield and the Town of Polk.

Until last year, some of the land was still farmed and one of the old farmhouses is still occupied.

The other looks like something out of a Stephen King movie. Windows are papered over with yellow newspaper. An abandoned bus sits outside. A tree is growing right out of the concrete of the front steps. What's there is worthless. What's underneath it - given the traffic on both sides - would seem invaluable.

While even the low-end estimate of 3 million visitors per year seems hard to believe, traffic counts are stratospheric as well.

Average traffic on Highway 45 north of the split already measures almost 30,000 vehicles per day, according to the Department of Transportation. Highway 41 north of the split measures more than 40,000 vehicles per day, and there are typically several thousand cars every day on state Highway 145 as well.

Public assistance

The development is a long way from happening - partly because Cabela's is not shy about seeking public subsidies.

A store that just opened in Buda, Texas, according to the Austin American-Statesman, received \$61 million in public financing.

Cabela's will get nothing close to that here, although some money for infrastructure improvements to things such as roads is inevitable if the project is to happen.

"They are saying \$10 million is what they need," Jeskewitz said.

She did not rule that out and noted that extensive road work is already planned in the area, although other local officials have talked about lesser amounts.

In return, they say, a Cabela's could bring millions of dollars of sales and property tax each year into state and local coffers.

If those numbers seem almost too good to be true, supporters also seem too adamant to dismiss.

Most residents of Washington County in the meantime have no doubt heard a whole lot more about PabstCity than what may soon rise up right next to them.

When I knocked on the door of one woman just east of Highway 45 recently, she said she hadn't heard anything about a Cabela's - and noted that it probably wouldn't affect her much since it would be on the other side of the highway.

She was very nice, but I think she was wrong.

Cabela's, the thing is, has a way of affecting just about everybody.

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