

Metro & New Mexico

Railyards May Become Film Studio

Producer Proposing Project Near Barela

BY DAN MAYFIELD
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A movie producer is proposing to redevelop part of the old railyards near Barelas into a \$50 million studio complex.

But plans for the studio are only in the early stages, and a federal lawsuit is tying up the land.

Elliott Lewitt, the producer of the recent award-winning film "Around the Bend," is teaming with Build New Mexico, the Urban Council of Albuquerque, United South Broadway Corp., and Burlington Northern and Santa Fe Railway on the project, according to a news release.

The idea is to build a large film and digital production studio on 11 acres at the old BNSF railyards.

The studio would house four state-of-the-art sound stages, office space, screening rooms, a warehouse, production shops and a training facility, according to the news release.

The studio would use existing buildings, including part of the 57,000-square-foot former steam engine repair shop.

Several developers have eyed the historic property since organizers of the Wheels Museum began a campaign to save the old shops.

Backers are careful to say the studio plan is not a done deal.

"You never know what'll happen. It's much too early to talk about it," said Lewitt, a producer and a co-CEO of developer Digital Media Group.

Toni-Lei Ponic, a spokeswoman for Build New Mexico, which is trying to put together financing for the project, said: "We are still in negotiations. We don't want to jump way ahead. I don't want to do that right now."

Nonetheless, the group put out a news release quoting Mayor Martin Chávez and Gov. Bill Richardson as supporters.

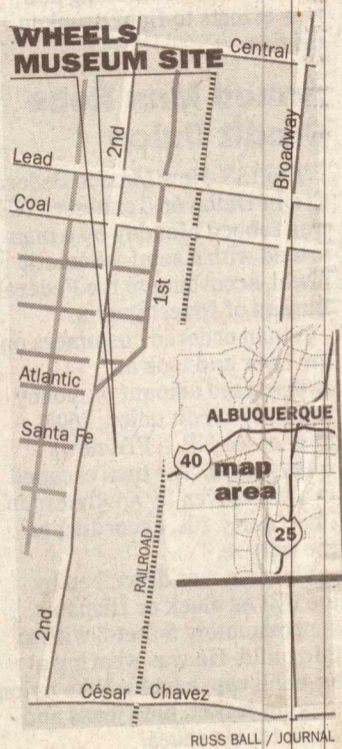
Ponic refused to say which part of the site would be used for the studio, though her company's news release identified the former steam engine repair shops.

More details will be released at a planning conference Thursday at 4:30 p.m. at the Barelas Community Center.

Lewitt said his company is considering Albuquerque because of the good experience he had here filming "Around the Bend" for Warner Bros. Independent.

"It's not a done deal, but it's close to that," Chávez said Monday. "This takes us to the next level."

Chávez said the city has helped the developers as much



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as it can. However, he said, "They have to resolve the messes that have been created by the Urban Council."

Chávez was referring to a federal lawsuit filed against the Urban Council, which controls the 27-acre tract under an agreement with the railroad.

Cleveland developer Richard Maron and MRN Limited Partnership was to develop the land, but negotiations broke down. In the suit, Maron seeks control of the property.

Ron Ashcraft, president of Urban Council, didn't return calls for comment Monday.

Leyba Freed, president of the Wheels Museum board of directors, said the studio wouldn't affect the museum's plans.

"We are very optimistic that it will be a compatible use, and we're just beginning to talk about possibilities about that," Freed said.

This summer, Texas developers announced plans for another studio in the Sawmill Neighborhood just north of Old Town. Representatives of Albuquerque Studios and Virtual Reality Experience say they could start construction early next year and have already signed agreements to buy 20 acres of land.