

## U.S. Soccer picks \$1B Fayette County development for first training center, HQ



*A rendering of the U.S. Soccer National Training Center.*

*U.S. Soccer*

By Amy Wenk and Chris Fuhrmeister – Atlanta Business Chronicle - Dec 7, 2023

The U.S. Soccer Federation has picked an emerging entertainment hub in Fayette County for its National Training Center, a more than \$200 million score for metro Atlanta's Southside.

The 200-acre facility will come to Trilith, the billion-dollar development that Chick-fil-A Chairman Dan Cathy is turning into a global sports and filming destination.

The deal brings together some of Atlanta's biggest companies and philanthropic leaders. Cindy Cone, president of U.S. Soccer, said their cooperation influenced the decision.

Atlanta United FC owner Arthur Blank donated \$50 million to lure U.S. Soccer to the metro area, beating out Cary, North Carolina. The Coca-Cola Co., which invests in professional soccer around the world, is a founding sponsor of the training center.

It will cost \$228 million, according to Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp's office.

"It really expands our definition of Trilith beyond just entertainment," Cathy told Atlanta Business Chronicle. "We think it's going to open the door to even more opportunities to have a major sports district that will be here in the metro Atlanta area, specifically in Fayette County."

The Chronicle reported in October that Cathy wanted the training center. He also hinted at bringing Formula 1 racing to Trilith.

The site for the training center sold in March for almost \$6.9 million to an affiliate of Bay Point Media, an investor in Trilith Studios, according to property records. U.S. Soccer intends to close on the site next year.

The project is expected to break ground in spring 2024. U.S. Soccer hopes to complete the project in time for the FIFA Men's World Cup in 2026, when Atlanta will be a host city.

## **Why Trilith?**

U.S. Soccer, headquartered in Chicago for more than three decades, had scouted nine potential metro Atlanta locations for a year. Other sites on the west and south sides of the city were pitched to the federation, including in Douglas County.

Trilith has a film campus interwoven with a residential community, shops, restaurants, and soon, a new hotel. Trilith spans about 1,000 acres and was inspired in part by Celebration, a master-planned community near Walt Disney World Resort.

"We just have world class written all over Fayette County," said Niki Vanderslice, executive director of the Fayette County Development Authority, listing off the investments at Trilith and a massive QTS data center campus near the future training center site.

Over a decade ago, Pinewood Studios, a prestigious film studio in England known for movie franchises like 007, wanted to expand in the United States. Cathy convinced Pinewood to choose Fayette County. Today, Pinewood's engineering is a reason Marvel Studios uses the Trilith campus for its productions.

Bob Voyles, CEO of Atlanta real estate firm Seven Oaks Co. LLC and a member of the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority, said Cathy made a long-term bet on Fayette County.

"He developed the critical mass," Voyles said. "I have always liked when good things happen for people who take big risks."

Cathy said, "These are global brands we are talking about. Pinewood. Marvel. Disney. Warner Bros. All of them are producing on our stages. Now, to have U.S. Soccer, it adds to these global brands."

## **The Southside**

The Southside was attractive to U.S. Soccer because it prioritized being close to the Atlanta airport. The area also has more land available compared to Atlanta and its northern suburbs.

Cathy grew up in Fayette County. Influenced by festivals including South by Southwest, he has sought to use media, arts and entertainment to turn Trilith into a center of "human flourishing."



*Dan Cathy, founder and chief visionary for Trilith.*

*Byron E. Small*

Now, he says adding U.S. Soccer is part of a "larger transformation of the Southside." Cathy sees more jobs for the region and an opportunity for high school students to pursue education in a wider variety of industries, from media and entertainment to sports.

"These rapidly growing industries are right in the sweet spot of where we need to make investments," Cathy said.

## **'Holy grail of economic development'**

John Boyd with Florida site selection company The Boyd. Co. said adding professional soccer fits with the content creation at Trilith.

Boyd believes the U.S. Soccer training center could lure more film and multimedia companies to Fayette County, along with e-sports and professional services.

Voyles said it means Trilith will see demand for more housing, restaurants, hotels and possibly a resort. Both see parallels with Truist Park and The Battery Atlanta, the Braves' ballpark and development in Cobb County. Now several years into the project, the Braves are running out of development sites.

Boyd said sports-related projects like Truist Park and the U.S. Soccer training center are becoming "the holy grail of economic development."

"Soccer has a unique global draw," he said. "It sort of punches above its weight in terms of its economic impact."

## **What the training center means for U.S. Soccer**

The new training center will be used by all 27 of U.S. Soccer's national teams. It will serve as the federation's headquarters and will create a total of 440 jobs, Kemp's office said.

"The ability to access the fields where our US teams play and train will really be a transformative experience for anyone who comes here to Atlanta," said JT Batson, U.S. Soccer's CEO.

It's not just current U.S. Soccer athletes who may benefit from the training center. It could also be a pipeline for players from Georgia's grassroots.

Elijah Miranda, executive director at Soccer in the Streets said youth players supported by the Atlanta-based nonprofit will benefit from exposure to "high-tech, state-of-the-art facilities." That could encourage more youth athletes to choose soccer over other sports, something fans of the U.S. Men's National Team have long coveted.

"Imagine if LeBron James — incredible athlete — had chosen to play soccer," Miranda said. "What would that look like? When you're able to provide more access to the game ... that's going to ultimately benefit the men's and women's national teams."

— *Doug Sams contributed to this article.*