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University of Oklahoma athletics drives \$1.1 billion entertainment district

Mixed-use hub's first phase to include performance venue, retail



A rendering shows the 8,000-seat arena expected to host Oklahoma men's and women's basketball games. (Rainier Cos.)

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The University of Oklahoma athletics department is driving a long-awaited \$1.1 billion, 269-acre entertainment district in Norman, Oklahoma, with site work expected to start this quarter on the first phase, which will include an 8,000-seat venue.

The OU Foundation, the site's owner, executed a master development agreement with Dallas-based Rainier Development Co. to build the Rock Creek Entertainment District in the city of Norman, where the university is based. The sports venue will host women's gymnastics, as well as men's and women's basketball teams.

The agreement follows a February Oklahoma Supreme Court ruling that allowed the project, about 20 miles south of Oklahoma City, to proceed after years of delay despite some local opposition over transparency and the use of public funds.



The arena is set to anchor a mixed-use district designed as a destination for residents and visitors in Norman. (Rainier Cos.)

OU is joining a [growing number of colleges](#) creating year-round destinations focused on sports venues with adjacent places to live, work and play. Other schools with similar public-private partnerships in the works include the University of Kansas, the [University of Hawaii](#), [Iowa State University](#), the [University of Tennessee](#) and [Wake Forest University](#).

The Norman project team includes the University of Oklahoma Foundation and development partner Dallas-based Lincoln Property Co., Rainier Cos. CEO Danny Lovell told CoStar News.

"We have been working on this project for four years side by side with the University of Oklahoma and its foundation," said Lovell, who grew up in Henryetta, Oklahoma, and has an affinity for his home state. "This project is a generational opportunity that will serve as a destination for families and visitors."

The initial part of the multiphase project is expected to include the 8,000-seat performance venue designed to host OU gymnastics meets and basketball games, as well as concerts and events. The first phase also includes 140,000 square feet of experiential retail space and about 250 apartments.

Collaborative planning and design

Rainier is working in collaboration with the city of Norman, Cleveland County, the University of Oklahoma and other community stakeholders as it leads planning, design and development of the Rock Creek Entertainment District.

Other phases will be timed with "disciplined growth, market relevance and long-term sustainability, and will proceed in coordination with public partners and subject to required approvals," according to the project's website.

Additional phases are expected to occur over a seven-to-10-year period in building out the mixed-use hub.

The second phase is expected to include 180,000 square feet of office space and a 150-room hotel. Lincoln Property Co. is helping with the development of apartments and office space, and Rainier is seeking to bring in a hotel developer.



[New Development Group To Bring Retail Edge to Mixed-Use Projects in Texas and US](#)

This is expected to be Rainier's first project to get underway since [the August 2023 launch of its development group](#) to focus on building sports-anchored destinations. The firm has seven projects in some stage of development with universities or other brands totaling over \$3 billion. One of those deals in the pipeline is also in Oklahoma. Rainier is working on a \$400 million, 37-acre mixed-use hub in south Tulsa, in partnership with the Muscogee Creek Nation, a self-governed Native American tribe, that is also expected to get underway by year's end. The mixed-use hub, called [Riverline](#), is expected to include about 650 apartments, with 200,000 square feet of retail, dining and entertainment venues.

Rainier President David Neher, with a career centered on developing destination-driven real estate, told CoStar News the Rock Creek Entertainment District project is emblematic of what the firm is seeking to create — setting the tone of more to come. This is a case of "high-stakes execution," he said, in which every decision has proven to be critical in moving it forward.



A conceptual view of the arena from across I-35. (Rainier Cos.)

"It has been challenging to be delayed on this project for four years, but it's all about your partners, with the University of Oklahoma being one of the most steadfast and supportive partners I've had in my 25-year career," Neher said, adding that the OU Foundation has owned the acreage, a former air base, for quite some time.

"This project is emblematic of our over \$3 billion in pre-development work," Neher added. OU Foundation President Guy Patton said in a statement that formalizing the long-term partnership with Rainier Development Co. in the Rock Creek Entertainment District marks a "significant step forward in advancing a vision shaped by the community and its leaders."

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