

*Home Depot to buy
50 acres on L Street
at site of the old
Western Electric*



Avaya's plan has prompted concerns that the city doesn't have enough say when key pieces of industrial land are re-developed.



Avaya plans to sell some of its land along L Street to Home Depot. In February, the struggling office-telephone maker said the Omaha plant might be sold. Some perceive that Avaya is marketing the rest of the open land, but a company spokesman denied that.

LAURA INNS/THE WORLD-HERALD

Avaya weighs land options

BY JEFFREY ROBB

WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Avaya Inc. soon could take its first step toward carving up its landmark, mile-long front lawn for new west Omaha development.

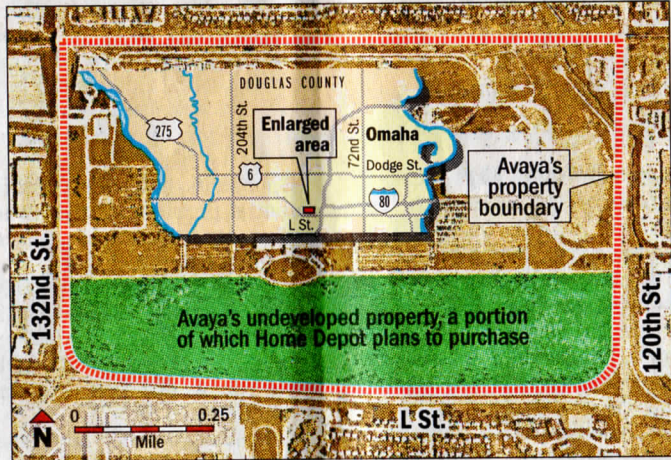
The Basking Ridge, N.J., company confirmed this week that it has a deal with Home Depot to sell about half the open space lining L Street between 120th and 132nd Streets.

Home Depot isn't announcing any plans yet. But the deal could lead to new buildings and parking lots, while dramatically affecting traffic.

Faced with change, some area residents would rather keep a green space that's larger than Memorial Park. Others see big potential for an untapped area.

City of Omaha planners are responding, too. Although any changes would come too late to apply to Home Depot's development, the Planning Department wants to tighten zoning ordinances that allow major business development on industrial land with little city oversight.

Many people are surprised



SOURCE: Douglas County Assessor

DARRELL FORBES/THE WORLD-HERALD

the land remained an unmarred fixture throughout the plant's history.

"I've been wondering what's going to happen to that land," said Len Buckwalter, chief deputy in the Douglas County Assessor's Office. "That is such a prime piece of ground."

From its spot along L Street, the plant opened in 1958 by Western Electric Co. set the pace for suburban Omaha growth. At its peak, the plant employed 7,700 workers, a number that stood around

2,000 earlier this year.

The green space remained as Western Electric turned into AT&T Technologies' Omaha Works, then Lucent Technologies and now Avaya, an office-telephone maker that has cut jobs amid a slump in the telecommunications industry.

Mary Ann Borgeson, a Douglas County commissioner who lives across L Street from Avaya, said it's nice to see the openness of the Avaya property after driving through de-

veloped Omaha. Off and on, she said, area residents have expressed concern about traffic that new development would generate.

But Borgeson said development there and a possible downtown project in old Millard could draw in people. On Avaya's land, Borgeson said she could envision several public uses, such as a senior center, community center or playing fields.

"You can do a whole heck of a lot," she said.

Jerry Reimer, president of the Old Millard East Neighborhood Association, said the plant and its land have meant a lot over the years to neighborhood homeowners who work there.

But Reimer said the neighborhood is turning over with younger families. He said new development would benefit those families and the area in general.

"We're still feeling the impact of what goes on at that plant in the neighborhood," Reimer said. "I'm not saying a Home Depot is better than an Avaya. But some options are better than no options."

See *Avaya*: Page 2

Avaya: Home Depot plans store at old Western Electric site

Continued from Page 1

Although Avaya's front lawn is green space and some area residents walk there, it looks more than it acts like a park.

The University of Nebraska at Omaha, though, holds up to three cross country meets on the property each year.

Gary Anderson, UNO's sports information director, said the university would look for a new site if development happens. He said the land's development is inevitable.

"We've been hearing rumors," he said, "that something might happen with the property for some time."

In February, an Avaya announcement opened up the possibility that the Omaha plant might be sold. Some perceive that Avaya's struggles are pushing it to shop the open land as well.

The land would net big money in Omaha's commercial market. Buckwalter said comparable west Omaha properties sold for more than \$200,000 an acre. That's a potential \$10 million gain on 50 acres.

Kevin Stewart, an Avaya spokesman, said the company's current condition is not part of its thinking in marketing the green space. Stewart said Avaya doesn't need the land for potential expansion.

"We've been looking at options for that property for some time, even before Avaya spun off," he said.

Stewart said Avaya has a contract to sell the western 50 acres to Home Depot. But Avaya, he said, is not marketing the remainder of the open land.

It's doubtful Home Depot would use 50 acres itself. In Papillion, the company built one of its smaller stores on 10 acres.

Tom Gray, a spokesman for Home Depot in Atlanta, said the company is considering a number of possible Omaha-area locations but declined to comment further.

As Avaya prepares to sell its land, Omaha planners are moving to revise city zoning ordinances.

Avaya's industrial zoning allows development of a wide

range of businesses on the site without new city approval. The city loses the ability to influence such things as appearance or parking.

Steve Jensen, assistant planning director, said the city wants an opportunity to review plans, especially when important industrial land could be lost.

"We should be careful before we just change the use of the site," Jensen said.

This week, the Omaha Planning Board heard a proposal to restrict new uses for industrial land, force rezoning for certain new businesses and make developers of large civic and commercial projects offer plans for city review.

Large retail projects, for instance, would face the regulations; a smaller service station or convenience store would not.

The Planning Board held over the topic for more discussion and a vote next month. The City Council would make the final decision.

With the potential Home Depot development along L Street, the City of Omaha maintains control over traffic issues such as street capacity, access to 132nd Street and the need for signals.

The city would look to the developer to pay for improvements, City Planning Director Bob Peters said.

The Nebraska Department of Roads also would have a say on streets.

John Jacobsen, district engineer for the Roads Department, said Home Depot discussed street issues with him several months ago in connection with a site to the property's east.

With L Street being a highway, the Roads Department would allow only one new intersection between 120th and 132nd Streets. Development at Avaya, Jacobsen said, would require more lanes on L Street, changes at the busy 120th and 132nd Street intersections and a signal around 126th Street.

"I've always wondered why somebody hadn't glommed onto that land," he said. "It seems an awfully huge area that wasn't developed."