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Atlanta Symphony Center's location suddenly up in the air
New Woodruff CEO says he is unsure as to where the symphony center will be
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THE \$300 MILLION Atlanta Symphony Center has been promoted as a soaring venue that will be an economic engine for the state and a "postcard" image recognized around the world.

Joseph R. Bankoff, the new president and chief executive officer of the Woodruff Arts Center, which owns the symphony, insists these plans will someday come to fruition—with one proviso. He is not sure where it will be.

The center has been planned to go up near the intersection of 14th and Peachtree streets, next door to the brand-new 1180 Peachtree tower. That building is home to King & Spalding, which, with down-the-street neighbor Alston & Bird, has pledged \$5 million toward the center's construction.

"I can't tell you that we are going to build it there," Bankoff said in a telephone interview Friday.

Bankoff, who last month left his partnership at King & Spalding to assume control of the Arts Center, was vague as to why the change might take place.

Bankoff said he has no particular view on where the building should go, but that "at this point, I am listening to a lot of people asking questions."

More questions may be on the way.

Susan Mendham, the president and CEO of the nonprofit Midtown Alliance, said she was not aware that the center's site could change. She called Bankoff's remarks "new information for public consumption."

"I think that it is going to be interesting to some people, but at the end of the day I believe that all of the right decisions will be made to get a world-class facility built," Mendham said.

The center is supposed to be part of the redevelopment of 6.2 acres that will include two acres of new public park and green space. The center would take 3.8 acres and include 279,600 square feet of space. Houston-based developer Hines bought 2.36 acres in September 2003 for the construction of 1180 Peachtree, according to Brock Harvey, assistant project manager with Hines.

"At the end of the day we're expecting that the property will look like one continuous development," Harvey said.

But, Harvey added, what happens next is in the Arts Center's hands because "they have not finalized their design and we are all done."

Last month, Hines finished the sale of 1180 Peachtree, which was completed earlier this year, to an affiliate of the Connecticut-based General Electric Pension Trust. But Hines continues to manage and lease the 41-story, 669,711-square-foot office building.

Officials with City Hall, King & Spalding and Alston & Bird could not be reached to discuss Bankoff's uncertainty. A representative from the Arthur M. Blank Foundation, which has pledged \$35 million toward the project, said the organization has no comment at this time.

Bankoff said projects like the symphony center take a long time to complete, pointing to the 15 years he said it took to complete the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles.

"We have talked about getting the hall opened by 2014, but it all depends on if we can get all the funding together to do it," Bankoff said. He added that the rising cost and availability of construction materials, such as the price of steel, also is a factor in the project's delay.

The Atlanta Symphony Center is expected to bring in a total of \$2 billion in new economic growth during construction and through the first 10 years of operation for the entire state, according to the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's Web site. During that same time, the Atlanta Symphony Center is expected to rake in \$1.6 billion for Fulton County and \$1.5 billion for the City of Atlanta, the Web site said.

The Web site also states that an annual average of 2,100 new jobs will be created after the center's construction between 2011 and 2020. About \$116 million in tax revenues through 2020 will be generated with \$67 million in state taxes, \$29 million in Fulton County taxes and \$20 million in City of Atlanta taxes.

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