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NJ soccer-only stadium to be crown jewel of MLS

By VICTOR EPSTEIN, Associated Press Writer

HARRISON, N.J. (AP) An intimate, soccer-only stadium rising in a careworn former industrial city is expected to be the crown jewel of Major League Soccer and one of the keys to a local redevelopment project.

At more than \$200 million, the new home of the New York Red Bulls professional soccer team will be the costliest MLS stadium ever built when it opens in March beside the Passaic River in Harrison. MLS Commissioner Don Garber said it "will be the premier soccer stadium in America."

Austria-based energy drink maker Red Bull GmbH is paying for everything at the stadium, just north of Newark's largely Brazilian and Portuguese Ironbound neighborhood, about 10 miles from New York City. It designed the 25,000-seat facility, which is shaped like a doughnut, along European lines, with an emphasis on getting fans close to the field - some just 21 feet away.

For the 15,000 residents of the northern New Jersey town, which can be reached directly from lower Manhattan via the PATH commuter train, Red Bull Arena is the centerpiece of a 250-acre riverfront revitalization effort 12 years in the making. The project has been delayed by the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, which destroyed the PATH station beneath the World Trade Center, and by the recession.

The mixed-use development project around the arena will produce 7,000 condominium and rental units, said Mayor Ray McDonough, who estimates completion in five years if the economy improves, 10 years if it doesn't.

The Harrison Redevelopment Agency's executive director, Greg Kowalski, estimated the total value of the project at about \$1.5 billion. He said the mix of tenant- and owner-occupied units is tilting toward the rental market as the recession makes mortgage financing more difficult. The location is popular with people who work in Manhattan and Newark, a regional employment hub.

Harrison, once known as the Beehive of Industry, has stagnated since the 1950s, as factory closings have eliminated more than 50,000 jobs. But McDonough said the riverfront development project could more than double its population and would "bring this town back to life."

Red Bull Arena will be the eighth soccer-only stadium for the 15-team MLS, which started in 1996. The strategy was adopted in 1999 to allow fans to bond with their stadiums much as New York Yankees baseball fans identify with Yankee Stadium and fans of the Manchester United soccer team in England identify with Old Trafford.

Early professional soccer leagues in the U.S. were at a disadvantage as tenants in stadiums meant for other sports, Garber said. And the Red Bulls have suffered from the lack of a home of their own. The team draws an average of 16,000 fans to its home games in East Rutherford at the original Giants Stadium, which seats about 80,000.

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Red Bulls spokesman Andy McGowan said the new arena is small by design to create a home team advantage.

"It's really to create that soccer atmosphere," he said, "so it's an exciting event to attend."

New York resident Zak Ivkovic, who has followed the team since its inception as the MetroStars in 1996, said soccer fans are eager for a team better than the current one, which, led by forward Juan Pablo Angel, has Major League Soccer's worst record.

"New York demands winners," Ivkovic said. "I'm glad they're building a great stadium, but at the end of day the Red Bulls have to consistently put a good team on the field."

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