

Liberty Ford leaving Solon for Aurora next year

By SUE REID | Posted: Wednesday, December 14, 2016 11:45 pm

Liberty Ford Solon will be moving to the city of Aurora and investing about \$10 million in a new dealership, company officials announced this week.

The company plans to phase out its operation on Aurora Road in Solon beginning next year.

Michael Herrick, president of the Liberty Auto Group and son of founder Jim Herrick, confirmed Monday that the auto group has signed a deal with Cedar Fair, owner of the former Geauga Lake Amusement Park and Sea World property, to purchase a 14-acre parcel for \$1.43 million.

The property will be located at the corner of Aurora and Squires roads, at the entrance to the Old Sea World complex near the Wild Water Kingdom sign and just 4 miles from the current Solon location.

Liberty Ford officials announced earlier this year that they would be leaving Solon after an impasse in negotiations to expand the site there. They have been in Solon for the past 16 years, but the location has been a car dealership since the 1950s.

Mr. Herrick said the dealership is working closely with Aurora officials on coming up with a proposal acceptable to the city since they are the first to purchase Cedar Fair land on the Aurora side of the Geauga Lake property.

“We will be the gateway to their development district and we take that very seriously,” Mr. Herrick said.

To that end, he has assured the city of Aurora that the dealership will not comply with the rules of Ford Motor Co. but rather what Aurora envisions for the site.

“We will build a facility that is the first of its kind that we know of,” he said.

The dealership will be more of a “campus structure” rather than a typical car lot and look similar to a small liberal arts school, he said.

A total of 25 percent of the property will be dedicated green space that will also include a playground.

The dealership will face inward because it will be a campus and courtyard style, but the primary access will be from Squires Road.

The auto group has not yet submitted formal plans to Aurora, Mr. Herrick noted, as they want to make sure that once they formally submit them, “that we put our best foot forward.

“We wanted to make sure we truly understood their vision for the whole development, not just our piece of it,” he said.

Mr. Herrick said he also took very seriously that this parcel of land has been parkland going back to when it was the original Geauga Lake. The amusement park closed in 2007.

“A lot of our design elements are to pay respect to that as a very important part of the community,” he said.

Pending all city approvals from Aurora, and ensuring that both the city and residents are comfortable and have ample input in the project, plans are to break ground in the spring, Mr. Herrick said. Site work will take place this year and include clearing of some trees.

“We also are going to try to preserve as many trees as possible,” he said.

Plans are to construct three buildings in Aurora, none of which will be more than 35,000 square feet. “It’s the city’s desire to have smaller footprints, and we are trying to comply with the spirit of that so it’s not a monster building,” he said.

The Aurora dealership will double the service capacity in Solon, and add 30 to 40 new jobs to the 60 already in Solon. The Solon location is the most landlocked and smallest of Liberty Ford’s six franchises.

“It will be a phased out process,” Mr. Herrick continued of leaving Solon. “We won’t be going anywhere anytime soon.

“We are happy to be 4 miles down the same road so this will not be an inconvenience for our customers or our employees,” he said.

The first building to be constructed in Aurora will be sales and light maintenance.

“We’re not going to rush it,” he said of the new development. “We will do it right. Speed is not the goal. Doing it once perfect is the goal.”

The second building would be service and the third the collision center.

“We are so excited,” Mr. Herrick said. “I think that while we have enjoyed our time in Solon and we always will remain a steadfast supporter of the Solon community, we needed to grow and our customers and employees needed us to grow to service their needs.

“Unfortunately the location we are at (in Solon) caps that growth,” he said. “We exercised every option we could to stay.”

Aurora is a community that is growing, Mr. Herrick noted.

“They seem excited to be developing that district,” he added.