

Plans in the works for esports auditorium, content production site in Mount Pleasant

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Plans are in the works to build a 1,500-seat esports venue in Mount Pleasant off Faison Road. Provided rendering

An alternative entertainment and tourist venue is in the works in the Lowcountry that would seek to attract competitors and fans of a fast-growing online activity: competitive video gaming.

“Esports is big business,” Mark Schuster, who is heading up the project, said during a recent presentation to Mount Pleasant Town Council’s economic development committee.

Gamers pay to watch other gamers play competitive video games for the same reasons fans of sports like football or baseball flock to those stadiums, he said.

Esports is “professional or semi-professional gaming in an organized format,” according to Newzoo, a firm that tracks data about the gaming industry. The pandemic canceled many in-person esports events, but the audience for the sport grew overall because the increased time spent at home accelerated the adoption of livestreaming. The livestreaming audience grew 12 percent in 2020 and is expected to expand by another 10 percent this year, [Newzoo found](#).

Schuster, who was behind the development of Joseph P. Riley Jr. Park and was the first general manager of the Charleston RiverDogs minor league baseball team, said he’d been having conversations with communities in other parts of the country about setting up esports-focused multi-purpose venues.

“So, while I’m out there talking to these other cities across the country, I’m thinking, ‘If I’m going to build these, why not build one in my own backyard?’” said Schuster, who lives in Mount Pleasant. The RiverDogs’ home field was his last project in the local area before this new venture. Because Charleston “is a destination,” Schuster said he sees potential for the region to be a “major league” esports market.

Much like any other sport, Schuster said he expects a similar infrastructure will emerge for esports, with cities like Las Vegas being mega-markets with the biggest venues, then “major league” and “minor league” markets below that.

For the last year, Schuster’s idea has been focused on a specific spot: part of the Carolina Park development off Faison Road in Mount Pleasant.

The venue would have a 1,600-seat auditorium with theatrical lighting and an “immersive” sound system where spectators would pay to watch gamers

compete in multiplayer contests. There would also be a convention hall, retail and dining areas, private event space and a place where aspiring pro esports players can work on their skills, according to the plans.

Other development could be added around it, like a hotel, restaurants and recreation venues — things families would seek out if they're in town for a tournament. "Esports will be the kind of anchor tenant on the land," Schuster said. But, Schuster said, the format of the auditorium would lend itself well to non-esports events, too, like concerts and conventions.

Another proposed part of the plans — a content production studio where things like commercials and other content could be shot — was the suggestion of Town Council member Kathy Landing, who is running for mayor.

The building would be "about the size of a grocery store," big enough to house three studios, Landing said, It also could house office space for post-production work.

The region's tourism marketing group, Explore Charleston, was presented with plans for the project early this year, Landing said.

"It was received with great excitement," Landing said.

It would cost about \$50 million to pull off the esports venue, including the acquisition of the land for about \$9 million, Schuster said.

Other potential elements of the project, like the production facility, hotel and other venues would require more capital.

Schuster said he's under a letter of intent for the Carolina Park property and hopes to have the complete plan in place for the venue, including where the capital is coming from, by the end of the year.