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Town sets sights on UFO landing area

By **ROGERS WORTHINGTON**
The Chicago Tribune

ELMWOOD, Wis. — Planners of Elmwood's annual UFO Days, strictly a local bash in previous years, are hoping for an invasion of celebrant earthlings this summer from far beyond the cozy hills of the Eau Galle Valley.

Just as other Wisconsin towns have Mosquito Days, Cucumber Days and other oddly named July festivals of food, parades and sporting events, Elmwood, population 991, has UFO Days, inspired by a wave of reported UFO sightings in the late 1970s.

The sightings brought Elmwood some notice, but the town did not become renowned until last February, when Wisconsin businessman Tom Weber announced a plan to raise \$50 million for a 2-square-mile, illuminated UFO landing site near Elmwood.

Weber said he needs \$25 million to buy the land and put up the buildings and another \$25 million to operate the site for a number of

years. He would not provide further details about the financial aspects of the project.

The site would have a giant, two-part panel depicting a friendly meeting between man and alien, Weber said. A third panel would be a landing site, which would be a circle 300 yards in diameter. Buildings housing scientists, radios and computer tracking devices would be nearby.

Weber, 50, has an abiding interest in the possibility of extraterrestrial life. He lives in Chippewa Falls, 45 miles northeast of Elmwood, where he owns a small metal paint finishings firm.

He chose Elmwood for the site because, between the reported sightings and its UFO Days, which this year will be July 29-31, it has "a community that is fully acclimated to the phenomenon," he said.

UFO talk and allusions are common in Elmwood, where claiming to see odd things in the sky is not necessarily viewed as a sign of oddness.

It helped, of course, that the town's mayor and village board were

receptive to Weber's plan. The idea of someone spending \$50 million in a farm town, where the annual village budget is \$283,411, seemed a fine one.

"We're just thrilled with it," said Wayne Nohelty, a banker and a planning commission member, who sees the possibility of developing tourism.

Elmwood is not the first Wisconsin town to try to capitalize on reported UFO sightings. Residents of Belleville, in south central Wisconsin, nearly passed a Kiwanis Club resolution declaring their town "the UFO capital of the universe." But officials chose instead to allow club members to erect a statue of a flying saucer in the town park, complete with flashing lights.

But not everyone in Elmwood supports Weber's plan.

"The whole thing lacks logic and any depth of real thinking about it," said the Rev. James Thunstrom, pastor of the Elmwood United Methodist Church. Thunstrom, who considers it all "a misguided effort to seek answers or help from spiritual

forces other than God," makes a point of taking his family out of town during UFO Days.

Even some of those in the UFO field are critical of the endeavor.

"We still don't know enough about what's going on to justify a landing pad," said Donald Schmitt, Wisconsin investigator and co-director of the Chicago-based Center for UFO Studies.

Jerome Clark, the center's vice president, termed Weber's plan naive. "We're dealing with a phenomenon that wants to conduct its business relatively undetected. It doesn't indicate it wants to have meetings with us," he said.

Weber said such criticism reflects the competitive nature of the UFO field. "We're the new kid on the block," he said. "If we're successful, they're out of business."

From Lake City, Pa., to El Cajon, Calif., a number of UFO landing pads have come and gone over the years. They have ranged from well-meaning civic endeavors to efforts by cult groups fired by religious millennialism. All are defunct or

gathering dust, like an unused plate set for a dinner guest who never came.

Weber resents such comparisons: "I guess you could say something has been tried before, but at what magnitude? I feel it's unfair to mention us in the same sentence with efforts by groups that wear white robes and chant."

No previous project, it can be said, has approached the magnitude of \$50 million in proposed financing. It is a huge amount to raise through public contributions. By comparison, NASA's Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence project, which scans outer space for alien radio signals, is hoping to win approval from Congress for its proposed budget of \$60 million for the next 10 years.

Weber won't say how much he has raised. An initial outpouring of small donations enabled him to open a UFO Site Center Corp. office in Chippewa Falls, where a telephone is manned eight hours a day. Beyond that, his fund-raising strategy seems to fluctuate somewhere between talk of millionaires back East and selling T-shirts and key chains.