

# Electronic Arts will move headquarters to downtown Orlando's Creative Village

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By Marco Santana and Martin E. Comas



A rendering shows the plans for Electronic Arts to move to downtown Orlando into the Creative Village. The city of Orlando will consider the move at Monday's city council meeting. (Submitted / Courtesy photo)

Electronic Arts plans to move its Central Florida headquarters from Maitland to downtown Orlando, potentially as soon as 2021, creating an anchor for what Mayor Buddy Dyer envisions will become a digital media hub.

EA could reap as much as \$9 million in property taxes under the deal.

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The company is seeking to move its 700 employees to a planned \$62 million, 180,000-square-foot, five-story office building that will be built on a 1.8-acre parcel at the new Creative Village downtown, according to documents posted to Monday's City Council agenda.

The company says the workforce could potentially grow to 1,000 by 2025, but the deal only requires that it maintain a workforce of 600.

"It's a huge deal because, in and of itself, Electronic Arts is a big deal," said Dyer, who is running for reelection next month against two opponents. "It immediately validates Creative Village as being the innovation center of Central Florida."



Orlando mayor Buddy Dyer delivers remarks to elected officials and community leader during his 2019 State of Downtown address, Wednesday, October 2, 2019. (Joe Burbank/Orlando Sentinel) 3089870 (Joe Burbank/Orlando Sentinel)

Creative Village is a \$1.5 billion development in downtown Orlando where UCF's downtown campus opened in August. City leaders also want it to become a home for technology companies.

Electronic Arts has been the highest-profile video game company in Central Florida since it acquired the small, 52-employee Tiburon studio in 1998 for an undisclosed sum.

The California-based company builds its popular Madden NFL franchise and other games in Maitland.

"Downtown [Orlando] is still a bit of blank slate in terms of what we can do," said Daryl Holt, EA's Orlando-based vice president and general manager. "And we can come in and be game-changing for this area. And it will be game-changing for us .... We will make great games and continue to innovate and hopefully bring in other companies."

He said the company would continue to grow and add more staff before the move downtown.

Holt made the comments after the mayor's annual "state of the downtown" speech that was held on the unfinished 11th floor of the Seaside Plaza highrise building off Church Street. The event was attended by about 400 people, including politicians, business people, city officials and community leaders.

Dyer touted the growth of downtown Orlando over the past five years. He pointed out how the large room was surrounded by windows that offered an open view of the city's burgeoning downtown.

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"It's a great day to be in downtown Orlando," Dyer said. "This room gives us the unique ability to have a 360-degree view of downtown Orlando. Through these windows, you see many of our accomplishments."

The highlight of the mayor's speech was the EA announcement, which drew cheers.

The agreement calls for a 625-space parking garage and an outdoor plaza on the property, bordered by Amelia and Concord streets and Ronald Blocker Avenue downtown.

The deal should close by May of next year, with construction expected to begin in the first half of next year. According to the timeline on the agenda, the building should be completed by the fourth quarter of 2021.

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The property is in the downtown Orlando Community Redevelopment Area, meaning EA will be able to capture some of the tax revenue generated by the increased value of the site for 15 years — the length of its initial lease — starting in 2022.

The maximum amount that it could receive is \$9 million, and the document estimates that \$520,000 would be generated in the first year.

"It's not upfront money," Dyer said. "We are offering an incentive for money that they are generating."

The Creative Village Development agency will buy the land for \$6 million and then lease it to Electronic Arts, the agreement says.

"They were the perfect fit and we certainly never hid the fact that this was our No. 1 target," said Craig Ustler, whose Ustler Develop Co. will help design and construct the building. "At the end of the day, it's exciting for EA, too. They are in a situation now where they can put their stamp on downtown Orlando."

An early rendering of the property shows a five-story building with EA's storied logo flashed on the top, along with a Madden-inspired mural on it.

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Electronic Arts could break its lease in Maitland as early as Oct. 31, 2021, if it pays a \$1.85 million termination fee and notifies the city between nine and 12 months in advance.

A Maitland city spokesman said relocations can be expected in Central Florida and that Electronic Arts has been a valued partner since they arrived.

"Of course, we believe EA Tiburon is a great match for Maitland," spokesman Robert Sargent said in a statement. "We will always consider EA Tiburon our close neighbor, regardless of any regional location choice."

Downtown Orlando is already home to the Florida Interactive Entertainment Academy, the video game design school established with Electronic Arts' backing in 2004.

"The partnership between FIEA and EA becomes the foundation for everything that is going to happen in the Creative Village especially around digital media," Holt said. "So hopefully, we'll continue to push the envelope."

The move could put a charge into Dyer's and Creative Village's long-stated goal of attracting digital media companies — specifically video game companies — to downtown.

In 2004, Electronic Arts turned down a \$36.9 million incentive package to move to Orlando and, that same year, the Legislature approved \$4.2 million to help launch FIEA, which has its offices and classrooms near Creative Village.

"It hasn't been overnight," Dyer said. It's been a 16-year courtship. Now we are engaged."

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