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Friday, December 13, 2002

Editorials

At Last, Sensible Dream for Detroit's Riverfront

By The Detroit News

The dream of a reclaimed riverfront has eluded Detroit for three quarters of a century. Going back to the 1920s, a succession of these visions all came to nothing.

But the plan for the east riverfront introduced Thursday by the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy not only promises to fulfill the old visions, it is going about it in all the right ways.

If its forecasts are correct, Detroit not only will wind up with a riverfront park, but a rebuilt tax base and a new urban community that will serve as a legitimate destination point.

There are several reasons for holding out that hope. For one thing, government is not trying to impose its own development plan on the area. It is, instead, creating an infrastructure upon which private developers can come in and figure out what the best use of the land may be.

Ultimately, the vision is for at least 4,000 housing units, along with office buildings and a thriving retail sector. But the details will be up to the developers.

When developers can respond to market demand and not to government dictates, that is a much healthier economic arrangement.

The conservancy, with an initial \$30 million endowment, also will have the ability to maintain the public facilities being created here.

That means the east riverfront will not have to struggle to survive on city funding, as does Belle Isle and other deteriorating Detroit parks. Part of the land will form a new state park, maintained by the state.

The three-mile long riverwalk, from Hart Plaza to the Belle Isle Bridge, should be a significant tourist attraction. No other waterfront in the country contains such a diverse set of attractions.



Daniel Mears / The Detroit News

A proposal would allow the redevelopment of Detroit's east riverfront with public and private money.

Riverfront funding

The proposed Detroit east riverfront redevelopment will be financed with \$559 million:

- ▶ The city of Detroit will provide \$190 million, mostly from gaming revenue, for the Civic Center Promenade, a parking deck, relocation of silos and environmental cleanup.
- ▶ General Motrs will spend \$135 million for parking decks, the River East Health Club, GM Plaza and the promenade.
- ▶ The state will spend \$150 Million to reconfigure I-375, provide Tricentennial State Park and a new harbor.
- ▶ The Kresge Foundation will give \$50

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There will be views of river traffic and Canada on one side and an urban park on the other. And where there are tourists, retail follows.

But even more promising than tourism is the mixed-use residential component. Unlike the downtown stadiums, theaters and casinos, the riverfront development will not only draw people into the city for a quick visit, it also will keep them there in a variety of apartments and condominiums.

High population densities of residents with dollars to spend are the surest way of attracting the stores and services the city so badly needs.

Most of the riverfront schemes of the past foundered because they had so little solid funding to back them up. This time there is a public-private mix of \$500 million starting off.

General Motors is in for \$135 million. The Kresge Foundation will contribute a series of grants for another \$50 million as successive benchmarks of the plan are achieved. The state will spend \$150 million on the park, a new docking point for cruise ships, and to reconfigure I-375 to make the site more accessible. Considerable federal and city funds are also involved.

Out of the debacle of the failed riverfront casino complex, the city also finds itself with the required property in the former Rivertown area.

The three industrial silos, which have always blocked any sort of continuous development on the riverfront, will be torn down and relocated as part of Detroit's agreement with the casinos.

The conservancy expects to see the riverwalk and park in place within four years and anticipates that the first residential units will be occupied shortly thereafter.

It goes without saying that this is a highly ambitious vision in a city that has seen more than its share of disappointments. It will take an enormous effort to change long-held perceptions and compete with the new developments that continue to cluster in the suburbs.

But the river is Detroit's ace card. It was why the city began. After 300 years, it can be the means by which it will be renewed.

million for a walkway along the Detroit River.

► The federal government will provide \$9 million for seawall improvements and a Port Authority Terminal.

► The Detroit Conservancy will raise \$25 million for the River Walk.

The Issue

Does the plan to remake Detroit's east riverfront have a chance to succeed?

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