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Detroit Riverfront Conservancy, Inc.

The proposed redevelopment plan for the Detroit riverfront includes turning Hart Plaza into a park-like area.

Analysis

Hurdles will test riverfront vision

Polluted land, lawsuits, project's cost are among challenges Detroit must confront

By Cameron McWhirter, and Darren A. Nichols / *The Detroit News*

DETROIT -- Organizers of Thursday's glitzy announcement on the future of Detroit's riverfront will have to prove to Detroiters that they can succeed where previous blue-ribbon commissions, well-intentioned mayors, powerful businesses and earnest community groups failed.

Transforming three miles of riverfront from old buildings and derelict lots to a people-friendly strip of parks, shops, housing and entertainment venues will require years of legal negotiating and fund-



Detroit Riverfront Conservancy, Inc.

A three-mile pathway from Belle Isle to Joe Louis Arena is to be included in a major revival of the Detroit riverfront. Transforming it will require years of legal negotiating and fund raising.

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raising. Pollution cleanup costs, legal wrangling and structures that have to be moved or demolished are only some of the problems the city, foundations and companies involved in the project must tackle.

Nevertheless Derrick Miller, chief administrative officer for Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick and one of the chief organizers of the revival effort, said the riverfront development team is poised to make real change, guided in part by other cities that have made waterfront renovation a key to urban revival.

"This is a perfect example of a public-private partnership," said Miller, one of numerous city, state and county officials on the Renaissance Center dais as plans for the project were unveiled.

Brochures and DVDs handed to those attending the announcement trumpeted "commitments for more than \$500 million in public, private and foundation funds to jump-start a massive reinvestment on the east riverfront."

In fact, the bulk of that money already had been committed for various projects, including parking decks for [General Motors Corp.](#) and the city, state road work near the water, a state park and movement of the three cement silos -- all of which had been announced previously.

But there was a substantial new commitment -- a grant from The Kresge Foundation for up to \$50 million to build and maintain the waterfront park, and a walkway from Cobo Center east to Belle Isle. If all the money is eventually dispensed, it would be the largest grant ever made by the Troy-based nonprofit.

Kresge will parcel the money in increments, as long as the city meets

▶ **WDIV-Local 4:** See a report and take a virtual tour of the proposed riverfront improvements

What's planned, who will pay

- ▶ \$150 million, relocate, raze cement silos, Detroit
- ▶ \$70 million, River East Health Club, retail, General Motors
- ▶ \$50 million, RiverWalk, Kresge Foundation
- ▶ \$30 million, parking deck, Detroit
- ▶ \$25 million, GM, Plaza and Promenade, General Motors
- ▶ \$10 million, Tri-Centennial Park and Harbor, Michigan
- ▶ \$8 million, Port of Detroit facility, Michigan, Detroit, Wayne County
- ▶ \$1 million, Seawall outfall, Corps of Engineers

Source: East Riverfront Study Group

Riverfront board

These members were named Thursday to a 30-seat conservancy board that will oversee park and walkway development on the river:

- ▶ Co-chairs Derrick Miller, chief administrative officer for Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick; and Matthew Cullen, general manager of economic development and enterprise services for General Motors.
- ▶ Vice-chairman David Page, a Detroit lawyer and trustee of the Kresge Foundation.
- ▶ Twelve of the 27 remaining slots were filled by representatives of local foundations and government agencies, including John Stroh III, chairman and CEO of the Stroh Companies.
- ▶ The 15 remaining positions, not yet filled, will represent such organizations and agencies as the United Auto Workers, Detroit Downtown, Inc. and the Detroit City Council.

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certain criteria along the way. One of those is that the newly created Detroit Riverfront Conservancy raise \$25 million in privately donated funds. The conservancy already has hired a grant writer for that purpose.

Unknown pollution

Remaining hurdles for the ambitious revitalization project include:

- ▶ Pollution cleanup costs, perhaps the greatest financial unknown of all. Detroit's east riverfront historically was a zone where shipping and tire companies, warehouses and other businesses grew up as part of Detroit's industrialization at the dawn of the last century.

That legacy has left a phenomenal amount of ground pollution, including dangerous levels of metals and toxins. Cleaning up these sites will be extremely expensive, though no one can say how much money it will require. The most notorious parcel along the east riverfront is the 44-acre Uniroyal site, across from Belle Isle. Although in a prime location, the area today is cordoned off by fencing with signs declaring it hazardous. The area is poisoned with chemicals and metals that have been linked to cancer and birth defects.

- ▶ The cement silos. While the city has committed tens of millions of dollars to moving three cement silos to another part of Detroit's waterfront, that location has not been determined and negotiations with the cement companies are not resolved.

- ▶ Lawsuits. Former Mayor Dennis Archer's plans to create a three-casino, mini-Atlantic City on the east riverfront led to years of bitter legal battles as the city tried to gain control of private land in the area, with limited success and at great cost. Legal issues have not been resolved.

- ▶ Ford Auditorium. Closed since 1995 after being used briefly as a homeless shelter, the former home of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra sits decaying next to the RenCen and Hart Plaza. Its demolition would cost tens of millions of dollars.

Failed plans

Detroit's riverfront has long been touted as a potential new entertainment and residential district, but previous plans have flopped. Even the recent addition of parks such as Chene Park have not sparked development or consistently drawn large crowds.

There have been successful major riverside developments in recent decades: Harbortown, River Place and a UAW office complex. General Motors also has invested tens of millions of dollars in revamping the RenCen and expanding development in and around its new world headquarters. But on the east riverfront, large tracts of land and enormous, abandoned factories have remained desolate, home to pheasant, rats and vagrants.

Katherine Clarkson, president of Detroit's nonprofit group Preservation Wayne, said Thursday's announcement is not the closing of a deal, but the beginning of a long process to develop the run-down section of the Motor City's riverfront.

"It's going to be a long road. The important thing now is we all keep

working toward (redevelopment)," she said. "It's not going to be an overnight success story."

City promoters have long hoped for a riverfront rebirth. Thursday's plan echoes similar developments in other major cities that have used their waterfront landscape to create tourist attractions: Cleveland's Flats, Chicago's Navy Pier and Baltimore's Inner Harbor.

In Cleveland, the Flats have undergone a dramatic transformation from a neighborhood of small factories and machine shops into a waterfront entertainment district. A strip of nearly 50 entertainment venues, the Flats attract more than 7 million visitors and generates nearly \$100 million in revenue every year. More than \$150 million has been invested in the development, which also includes housing, an amphitheater and a waterfront boardwalk.

Chicago revamped its almost mile-long Navy Pier on Lake Michigan from a shipping dock into a shopping and dining mall that draws tens of thousands of tourists from across the Midwest.

San Antonio revamped its small riverfront into a unique riverwalk that draws tourists to many of the city's hotels, restaurants, dance clubs, bars and shops along a two-mile stretch of downtown. The area, also known as Paseo Del Rio, generates nearly \$800 million a year for the city's economy.

For waterfront success stories, Detroiters need only look across the river to Windsor. Since the 1950s, Windsor has acquired riverfront land and turned it into park. Today the city of more than 200,000 has nine miles of riverfront park while Detroit, a city of about 950,000, would have three miles if the plan is implemented.

Windsor Mayor Michael Hurst said Thursday his city's extensive riverfront park has sparked hundreds of millions of dollars of high-rise residential development just near the park.

"That's only increased (tax) assessments and that has helped the community," he said.

Casino deal changed

When Kilpatrick took office this year, he declared Archer's riverfront casino idea dead. After months of battles with the City Council, Kilpatrick secured permanent casino deals to set up the casinos downtown, away from the riverfront. Since then, city officials, out-of-town development consultants and community groups have been meeting to hammer out plans to redevelop the riverfront area.

This summer, the Detroit Economic Growth Corp., controlled by Kilpatrick, hired a design firm to draw up plans for Rivertown. In September, Kilpatrick appointed an advisory panel, also headed by Miller and Cullen, to create a development plan for the east riverfront in three months.

Preservationists and community activists supported the group's efforts, but worry about the future of many of the area's old buildings. Preservationists argue that the city must restore these buildings, many of which were vital in establishing Detroit as the Motor City.

"The only way to create a truly unique area is to save as much of its

history as possible," said Carol Weisfeld, secretary of the Riverfront East Alliance, a community group that has fought for mixed-use development on the riverfront for years

Some business people in the area remain skeptical of the new plans. As the high-powered assemblage talked of their "vision" on Thursday, Andrew Owens stood in coveralls pounding metal sheets in an empty warehouse on Franklin Street in Rivertown.

When someone knocked on his door, Owens ran to see if his van was being stolen on a barren street of vacant buildings and lots overgrown with weeds. Asked what he thought of Thursday's announcements, Owens shrugged.

"We figure nothing is really going to happen for 10 years," said Owens, a custom furniture maker who has rented machine shop space in Rivertown since 1994. "You get excited when you hear them talk, but then it takes forever for anything to appear."

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