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## Detroit riverfront rebirth takes shape but much work remains

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*/ The Detroit News*

The decades-long dream of transforming Detroit's downtown riverfront into an urban destination is getting closer to reality, boosters say, but challenges remain to build private developments in the remaining gaps.

Hundreds of millions of dollars in private and government funding have been invested in cleaning the river's edge and creating green spaces in the area from Joe Louis Arena to Belle Isle.

There is also new commerce. Port Detroit opens next month in the shadow of an expanding Cobo Center and General Motor Co.'s Renaissance Center. Officials for the \$22 million taxpayer-subsidized dock and terminal hope to attract waterfront tourism.

"Detroit has had waterfront envy for a very long time, as we look to other cities and see what they have done. But we are getting there," said Matt Cullen, chairman of the Detroit RiverFront Conservancy, the nonprofit that's played a key role in guiding a private-public development that's raised more than \$150 million since 2003.

During that time, Detroit provided valuable riverfront land and significant infrastructure improvements. GM invested \$25 million in its waterfront renovations at the RenCen, which included the construction of the GM Plaza and the first half-mile of the RiverWalk. And the Kresge Foundation supplied its largest grant to a single project — \$50 million.

Ultimately, boosters want to develop 5 1/2 miles of riverfront from the Ambassador Bridge to the MacArthur Bridge (better known as the Belle Isle Bridge). The first phase of the RiverWalk, which is 3 1/2 miles, is 80 percent complete and spans from Joe Louis Arena to Gabriel Richard Park.

But mistakes have left their mark. A failed effort to put the permanent sites for Detroit's three casinos in the east riverfront area has left some land marred by blighted, empty buildings.

Cullen and Faye Nelson, president and CEO of the Detroit RiverFront Conservancy, acknowledged that the squeeze on commercial lending has slowed developers from pursuing riverfront projects.

"There's been great progress, but it's not been an easy journey," Randy Lewarchik, an owner of the Elevator Building, a former warehouse.

The building is located a block away from the newly opened \$1 million extension of the Dequindre Greenway where it meets William G. Milliken State Park, Michigan's first urban park.

"It's gorgeous now, which is really saying something because when we first got here we were surrounded by abandoned cars, a lot of empty buildings and trash," said Lewarchik, who bought the Elevator Building in 2007 with partners.

The progress includes:

Three cement silos sites are demolished now, but the sites are weedy and chained off because the real estate crash of 2008 wiped out plans for luxury housing projects. That includes a parcel once controlled by a development group that included Detroit Mayor Dave Bing, who wasn't mayor at the time. Those sites are now back in city control as the city officials wait for a developer to step forward.

"We get a lot of development interest" in the sites, said Will Tamminga, a project director for the Detroit Economic Growth Corp., the quasi-public agency.

Besides the credit crunch all developers face, the state Legislature has passed Gov. Rick Snyder's business tax reform legislation that eliminates key tax incentives — such as brownfield redevelopment credits — that most urban developers have used to get deals done. An alternative hasn't been passed.

A development that opened is the former Omni Hotel, 1000 Place, which closed in October. It was quickly bought in November and opened last month as the Roberts Riverwalk Hotel & Residence with 54 hotel rooms and 54 senior housing units. The hotel was bought by St. Louis-based Roberts Cos. for an undisclosed price.

And a senior citizen health complex is planned in two empty industrial structures just north of the UAW-GM Center for Human Resources. The project involves the Henry Ford Health System, Presbyterian Villages of Michigan and United Methodist Retirement Communities.

The extension of the Dequindre Cut Greenway pedestrian and bicycle path opened last summer, linking it to the expanded Milliken State Park and RiverWalk. The Dequindre link passes near the boarded-up empty buildings that once were a thriving cluster of bars and restaurants before the city targeted the area to make way for casinos that were ultimately built elsewhere in the city.

Port Detroit opens in June. The port has booked one cruise ship, but officials contend they needed to focus on the port's opening before they could aggressively pursue clients.

Those kinds of investments keep Lewarchik optimistic. He and his partners who bought the Elevator Building dreamed of turning the building into upscale condominiums. Four years later, Lewarchik said he is renting the space to small businesses and will soon be 100 percent occupied.

"I still have faith," Lewarchik said. "It took longer than anyone wanted, but that is Detroit."

Other businesses also have faith, said Arthur "Chip" Rohde Jr., president of the year-old Rivertown Detroit Association, a 500-member community group of businesses and residents.

"At least now we are being considered by retail and for office space," he said, "and it wasn't so long ago that was not the case at all."

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