

1st Street construction planned through 2013

By Lynne Senne

There seems to be a never-ending cloud of dust around 1st Street, and construction equipment appears to be on a constant rotation in and out of the area. While there is no official schedule detailing when the 1st Street redevelopment project will be complete, Susan Kempf, who is responsible for the weekly 1st Street updates, said work is definitely planned through the fall of 2013.

"To residents and the general public, the project will really begin to look nice and take shape in 2008, when the new Blue Goose will be open, the new parking deck will be done, the public plazas will be built and open for public use and seasonal activities, and some of the housing will be occupied," Kempf said.

The estimated total cost of the project, as of last November, is \$101,211,000.

"This project is the largest the City of St. Charles has ever undertaken," Kempf said. "It is an important project for St. Charles' future."

In the fall of 2006, utility infrastructure improvements began with the removal of utility poles. All electric, cable and phone lines were placed underground, according to Kempf. Crews also replaced and upgraded water, sewer and storm sewer facilities.

Road construction began after the completion of the utility work. The roadwork plan included five phases, two of which have been completed. From Prairie Street north to Illinois Street is already finished, and Illinois to Main Street and parts of Illinois and Walnut will also see construction.

"These remaining phases will begin in (the) spring (of) 2008 and should be done by early fall," Kempf said.

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Building construction also began in the spring of 2006. The Harris Bank building was the first officially within the redevelopment boundaries, according to Kempf. Occupancy is expected by Nov. 1, she said.

Crews began the new Blue Goose Supermarket this summer, and work on The Plaza building and parking deck started in August. The River Loft and River Terrace buildings are scheduled for construction in the spring of 2008.

Kempf said further construction will depend on the status of the buildings already in the works.

To receive weekly updates on construction status, city residents may register at www.1ststreetstc.org. Updates are also published in *The Examiner*.

Kempf said some of the construction schedule has already been adjusted. The roadwork previously planned for this fall was pushed back to the spring to "accommodate local businesses and the building construction activities," Kempf said.

Accommodating local businesses was a key element in the collaborative effort that sparked the 1st Street project. The city and the Downtown St. Charles Partnership evaluated downtown as a whole and looked for specific areas in need of improvement.

"(We) identified some of the challenges we face—traffic and noise on Route 64, segregated shopping districts, parking, etc.—and set goals and a vision of what the community would envision as an ideal down-

town," Kempf said.

She said 1st Street was identified as a "very key area" for redevelopment.

"(It is) an area ideal for public plazas, public river access, pedestrian-friendly shopping, and mixed-use development where people can live, work, park, shop and dine, all within blocks," Kempf said. "This type of pedestrian-friendly area would be impossible on Main Street, as it is also a very busy state route and the city has no control over the traffic volume, width of the roadway, etc."

Because Main Street is a state highway, the Illinois Department of Transportation has jurisdiction over the road.

In order to allay the costs of the project, the city created a tax increment financing district for the utilities, infrastructure, streets, public plaza and river walk improvements. Creation of the TIF district enabled the city to fund the project without an additional tax to residents.

According to Finance Director Pam Colby, a TIF district allows the city to use all the property tax money generated from increases in the market value due to development.

"This tax money is used to pay the debt service on the bonds that were sold to pay for the development," Colby said.

The TIF district is set up for 23 years, according to Colby.

"At the end of that term, the bonds are paid off and the property tax revenue goes back to the original taxing districts—park, school, county, etc."

Once completed, planners hope the area will be a hub for local business and activity, where residents can enjoy shopping, eating and recreational activities within walking distance from their homes.