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## Officials celebrate, break ground on First

By Meghan C. Smith

Staff writer

The shovels turning the ground on St. Charles' First Street last week was just the tip of the iceberg in transforming the city's downtown into what Mayor Don DeWitte said will be a new identity that will define the area for the next 100 years.

On Sept. 6, the city held its official kickoff event and groundbreaking commemorating the start of its First Street redevelopment project.

The city's estimated \$100 million, multiyear initiative will revamp First from Main Street south to Prairie Street. The project will primarily be located on 8 acres generally bounded by the Fox River, Main, Second and Prairie streets. It is intended to draw in more residential and retail shops to the downtown area.

"This new downtown environment will be both people-friendly and business-savvy. It will re-create an attractive, mixed-use downtown that will integrate our needs for community to live, work, shop and pursue leisure activities, in a more human-scale environment," DeWitte said before an audience of about 200 people at the ceremony.

DeWitte said in past years residents had once relished in taking an easy pedestrian access to their downtown on Main. He said pedestrians once walked along broad sidewalks and lingered at storefronts along a slower-paced roadway. However, with the rebuilding of the Main Street bridge in 1994 and the widening of Main, a majority of the city's on-street parking was eliminated as well as the buffer between the people and the street.

"The (city) has responded with the First Street redevelopment project to re-create a welcoming, pedestrian-friendly downtown business district in the heart of the city, where people from both sides of the river can meet and enjoy the community and our beautiful natural setting along the banks of the Fox River," he said.

City Administrator Brian Townsend called the project a "holy grail" for the city.

"We have experienced unanticipated setbacks, but we have persevered. We have continued to work hard. And we continued to hope that one day that hard work would pay off and we would reach a point where significant positive progress can be celebrated. Today, we have reached that point," he said Sept. 6.

The architect for the project, Mark Knauer of Deerfield-based Knauer Inc., also spoke briefly about the project.

"We designed this project to last 100 years, and we take that very seriously," he said. "This will be a real downtown that is going to live, evolve and change over time."

Knauer also presented DeWitte with a painting, by Chicago artist Mark McMahon, depicting what the First Street project will eventually look like when completed.

In conjunction with the kickoff event, the city has launched a First Street Web site, [www.1stStreetSTC.org](http://www.1stStreetSTC.org). The site will provide a central location for interested parties to find important and timely information related to the project.

Actual work on the city's First Street project will not begin until Monday, Oct. 2, when Bartlett-based Benchmark Construction Co. Inc. will work on the underground utilities -- sanitary sewer, water and electrical lines. The city hired Benchmark last month for about \$2.9 million. The work is expected to be completed by mid-June 2007.

In the meantime, city staff said the developers, St. Charles-based First Street Development LLC, are moving forward on the planned unit development process. A public hearing to consider the PUD application will be during the Plan Commission meeting at 7 p.m. Tuesday, Sept. 19, in the St. Charles Municipal Center, 2 E. Main St.

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