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A downtown rises

St. Charles launches ambitious project to redevelop riverfront area

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With its stunning views of the Fox River and successful restaurants and nightclubs filling quaint brick storefronts that date to the 1850s, St. Charles' downtown is the envy of many communities.

But now the former mill town wants more—a vibrant blend of old and new. It hopes to get it with a more than \$105 million, six-year redevelopment project designed to bring people and stores to four blocks of downtown riverfront. When completed, the area will boast nearly 200,000 square feet of offices, stores and restaurants, 80 condominiums and 16 apartments, as well as parking for an additional 933 cars.

"I really believe this is one decision that will redefine St. Charles for the next 100 years," Mayor Don DeWitte said Wednesday.

St. Charles is just one of many suburbs hoping to lure shoppers back to downtowns that have been abandoned for outlying strip malls and shopping centers. Although efforts at revitalization are under way in neighboring West Chicago as well as in Elgin, Aurora, and Glen Ellyn, few towns are going as far as St. Charles.

On 1st Street, site of a groundbreaking ceremony Wednesday night, community leaders are hoping to create a lively commercial shopping district, as Illinois Highway 64 used to be.

"We are picking up our Main Street and turning it perpendicular on 1st Street, and we are going to create a pedestrian-friendly environment," DeWitte said.

Construction will begin Oct. 1 on \$3 million worth of water, sewer and electric infrastructure.

The new buildings will complement the historic architecture in the area, as will a riverfront walkway and public plazas. The city hopes to create a place where people can walk and window-shop in a tranquil, scenic environment.

"A city needs a center. It needs an identity," said David Lencioni, 59, owner of The Blue Goose grocery, a mainstay in downtown St. Charles since 1928.

Lencioni has long advocated for a city-led initiative to re-invigorate the downtown.

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"Something is finally going to be done. It's been kind of a dream for some of us," Lencioni said. "It's going to be some kind of blend between urban and suburban. I don't know what you would call it. The downtown is going to be the place where things happen again."

Naperville invested for years in its downtown shopping district, and it's reaping the benefits with national retail chains and branch locations of well-known Chicago restaurants.

In Aurora, private developers intend to spend more than \$200 million to build 1,400 condominiums and 250,000 square feet of office and retail space downtown, said Carie Anne Ergo, a city spokeswoman. Aurora also is investing \$50 million in storm and sanitary sewers to encourage more development downtown, Ergo said.

West Chicago has been acquiring lots along Main Street between Illinois Highway 59 and Washington Street as part of a long-term strategy for a downtown redevelopment, said Joanne Kalchbrenner, community development director.

Rather than take them through condemnation, the properties are being bought as owners put them on the market. The city hopes to acquire enough land to sustain a downtown redevelopment project, Kalchbrenner said, even though it would not be as sweeping as St. Charles'.

"We don't have that kind of money, unfortunately," she said.

In St. Charles, STC Development LLC is paying about \$70 million of the \$105 million-plus redevelopment price tag. The city is contributing \$35 million for land acquisition and public improvements, and it intends to pay with the increased property taxes that come from the development.

There are many similarities between the St. Charles project and one in Geneva more than 20 years ago, said Chris Aiston, Geneva's economic development director. Today, Geneva enjoys a popular shopping district on 3rd Street, Aiston said.

While the St. Charles redevelopment may create more competition for local shoppers, it probably will benefit the region, Aiston said.

"I applaud St. Charles. It's an ambitious plan. I hope it is a success, quite frankly," Aiston said.

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