

Patience Pays Off Tying It All Together in East Peoria

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Benjamin Franklin, one of this country's civic improvement pioneers and an architect of the nation itself, wrote for his *Poor Richard's Almanack*, "He that can have patience can have what he will."

It's been a long nine years charted by waves of "anticipation and disappointment," as one city official said, since East Peoria's leaders first unveiled plans to modernize the city's look and character through the project now known as East Peoria/Downtown 2010.

The time, however, allowed the ambitious project's intention and scope to evolve. The city also used it to pursue other public/private efforts such as the Embassy Suites hotel and conference center, the Kohl's department store and other developments along Camp Street. Success at that grand level fueled the confidence the city and its private partners showed in tagging EP2010 with its date-specific title two years ago.

Yet with the target year now half complete, the project site of nearly 100 acres in the heart of the city remains as barren as the day last September when gold-painted shovels, hardhats and an all-star cast of office holders were collected for a ceremonial groundbreaking. While promises of state funding essential to launch the project inspired the event, EP2010's planners still faced one more winter of paperwork, perseverance, politics and patience.

Then came June 10th.

That day, the Illinois Department of Transportation finally put the \$26 million the state promised in capital

budget funds a year ago on the line and advertised for bids to build the streets, bridge and related infrastructure that will open up and intersect at EP2010's center.

Road construction will begin in August. "That is happening," city attorney Dennis Triggs told the City Council. "It is no longer a point of discussion."

A new West Washington and an extended Edmund Street, with a bridge connecting it to the separately reconstructed Camp Street, will cross to mark the project sector committed to public uses. They include a "civic plaza," the not-for-profit Caterpillar Heritage Museum that's long been part of EP2010's plans and—a key feature only recently added—a new Fondulac District Library.

Since voters approved a modest property tax increase to build the new library in April 2009, its planning has moved in tandem with the city's concepts for an atrium connecting the library with a new city hall.

"We can't build until we have streets, but it will be worth the wait," said library director Amy Falsz-Peterson. "A new library in the context of a live-work environment...it will be really exciting to be part of that."

The New Urbanism live-work environment continues to be in the plans—a mixture of apartments above stores along sidewalks designed to give EP2010 its own streetscape signature that will leap from artist renditions to reality as the 16 months of road construction near their end.

So, too, will the commercial/retail elements of EP2010 that Cullinan Properties Ltd. of Peoria has been preparing since the city chose it as the project's master developer in mid-2008. Cullinan will move its headquarters into the multi-story office/financial building in conjunction with a local financial institution.

As the nationwide "Great Recession" surged and receded, Cullinan is pleased with the strong interest from a host of large and small retail, restaurant, commercial and other business outlets that will fill EP2010.

Patience is still a need. Buildings of substance typically require about 14 months to construct. Work on the first EP2010 structures, including the library and office building, won't begin until this fall, as infrastructure must first be constructed and architectural plans completed. Occupancy, however, is projected for May 2012.

Another building project less than a mile from EP2010, however, is on such a fast track that it will be completed by Christmas 2011. Virtually on the banks of the Illinois River, the newest addition to the Bass Pro Shops chain, the gold standard of outdoor retailers, will draw substantially more than a million shoppers and visitors annually to the retail neighborhood it will share with EP2010.

"It's all part of an effort to revitalize everything below the bluffs" to the river, Triggs told the council. "They all tie together."

And woven through it all will be the last stretch of the River Trail of Illinois hiking/biking path between Morton and the Bob Michel Bridge. While a bike trail was part of the city's original plans for the main EP2010 site, it also languished until a \$150,000 state grant request was approved this spring.

It takes patience to sew a quilt. The city started with a challenging design nine years ago, but no one could have predicted the dazzling patchwork that would evolve.

In that sense, Franklin underestimated East Peoria. **iBi**

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