

Riverfront Crossing work set for summer

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Demolition crews will descend on Riverfront Crossing as early as midsummer to take down three buildings, setting the stage for the downtown Owensboro transformation of the square block into a pedestrian-friendly restaurant, retail and residential destination.

What was originally dubbed Market Square Plaza underwent a concept change last year after the city acquired the 17-acre Executive Inn Rivermont property. That led to the rethinking of the market square plaza/farmers market planned for the block north of the Daviess County Courthouse.

With a new name and new concept, Riverfront Crossing will retain more of the existing structures that occupy the block. Only three structures will be demolished to facilitate east-west and north-south "paseos," or throughways.

The former American Bounty restaurant facing St. Ann Street will be torn down and eventually replaced by a new restaurant. One building facing Second Street in the middle of the block will come down, allowing for the widening of the north-south route from Second to Veterans Boulevard. A building facing Frederica Street directly south of El Toribio restaurant will be demolished to make more room for the east-west corridor.

"Agreements have been reached on all the properties," said Fred Reeves, downtown development director. "One or two property easements still need to be finalized for parking areas for the businesses that will remain. We're looking at demolition no later than midsummer. We made the decision to demolish the American Bounty building. It has structural problems. EDSA and Michael Huston of Gateway Planning will design a building to replace American Bounty. We will issue an RFP (request for proposals) to build (and own) it."

Reeves said a two-story building will be designed with a restaurant on the ground floor with a dining patio facing the interior of the block, and condo or loft apartments on the second floor. The property will be sold to a private owner/investor to put it back on the property tax rolls, said Reeves.

"We'll specify we want a restaurant with dining on the backside facing the plaza," Reeves said. "You can do a very nice restaurant there 20 feet wide. It could be a very nice live-work arrangement for someone. It has a lot of potential."

Initially, Riverfront Crossing will have two restaurants (El Toribios and the replacement for American Bounty), but more dining establishments could come later, Reeves said. A four-story building next to the Sullivan, Mountjoy, Stainback & Miller law office facing Veterans Boulevard, with ground-floor retail and condos or apartments above, is another idea being considered, Reeves said.

According to the city's latest project list, construction of Riverfront Crossing could start as early as September, with EDSA, a Fort Lauderdale, Fla., planning, landscape architectural and urban design firm, at work on the final plans and specifications.

Changing the concept for the block saved millions, most of it in reduced property acquisition costs, Reeves said last year. The cost was reduced from about \$9.5 million to \$4.5 million.

Meanwhile, other aspects of the \$80 million city-county downtown master plan project are moving forward, along with the mostly federally funded \$40 million river wall project. The privately funded downtown hotel and city-county funded convention and events center, which will be connected, are in the planning stage. But an obstacle was thrown up when the city put its \$1.74 million purchase of the state office building -- where the hotel is proposed to sit -- on hold because the site is contaminated with dry cleaning chemicals. The city and state are currently trying to negotiate a lower price for the building.

Wednesday, members of the steering committee planning the Owensboro convention and events center went on a fact- and idea-seeking mission to Dubuque, Iowa, where they visited a convention center/hotel complex and a nearby indoor arena.

City Engineer Joe Schepers said the downtown river wall project, scheduled for completion late this year, is proceeding smoothly. Slight design changes to the inlet water feature to change the way water will flow down the steps have been made. On the far west end of the project, temporary coffer dams have been built to aid in the construction of a sewer outfall pipe that goes through the wall. At the other end of the project, permanent sheet piles will be driven into the bank this summer to connect the wall to the corner of the RiverPark Center patio.

Large drainage pipes are being installed under what will be the new Smothers Park, and hand rails will be installed beginning in May along the wall, Schepers said. This summer, the concrete panels that will cover the outer surface of the wall will be dropped into place and connected.

Investment interest in downtown is picking up, Reeves said. One out-of-town restaurant owner is actively looking for space for a downtown Owensboro restaurant, and a local restaurant owner is doing the same, Reeves said. One is for a combination diner/bakery and the other is for a deli. Neither will be part of a chain.

Nearby in the Smith-Werner Building at 122 W. Second, Bee Bops, a retro-'50s diner, is expected to open in a matter of weeks, Reeves said. The owner is Samantha Ellison, who said in January it would have a 32-foot counter with stools and counter service as well as booths for table service.

The new Gambrinus Libation Emporium, an upscale bar, is open 116 W. Second St. in another part of the Smith-Werner Building.

"More people are coming downtown," Reeves said. "I see people driving and walking. I hear stories of increased traffic. I think people are beginning to explore downtown. I think things are moving in the right direction. All the local elected officials are still supportive, and that's good."

* Downtown traffic study -- The state Transportation Cabinet has approved the changes proposed by Lexington traffic consultant ENTRAN, which include



Owensboro Facilities Maintenance Department workers, from left, Anthony Green and Bobby Cumpston pull up a tree stump as Debbie Murphy watches Tuesday afternoon next to McConnell Plaza. Murphy and her crew are cleaning up and pulling weeds in a planter with ornamental grasses adjacent to the former Executive Inn Rivermont Expo Center property as part of preparations for the International Bar-B-Q Festival May 7-8. Gary Emord-Netzley, Messenger-Inquirer



making Second and Fourth streets two-way, prohibiting large trucks from Second and rerouting U.S. 60 around Owensboro on what is now the U.S. 60 bypass. The plan is now in the hands of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials for a formal vote on or about May 20.

* Rebuild Smothers Park and Veterans Boulevard -- The Smothers Park project, planned by EDSA, will follow the completion of the river wall project. City Manager Bill Parrish said in November that the city plans to set aside \$20 million of the \$59 million it has allocated for downtown revitalization for the Smothers Park and Veterans Boulevard renovation projects.

City officials have said the best guess for the entire riverfront project to be finished is late spring or early summer of 2012, a little more than two years from now. A 200-foot wide inlet water feature will have water cascading down steps to the river. A fountain will shoot water high in the air and it will be flanked by a pair of smaller "sprayground" fountains. A large restroom/concessions building will sit in the middle of the park, with a children's playground to the east of it. People will be able to walk along the edge of the river wall.

* Rivermont Park -- In early March the City Commission approved a municipal order dedicating a portion of city-owned property along the Ohio River formerly occupied by the Executive Inn Rivermont as a public park to be known as Rivermont Park and authorized the procurement of engineering services up to \$150,000 to design the improvements to the new park.

* Demolition of the Executive Inn Rivermont -- Denney Excavating is close to being finished with the job. All of the former hotel except for the Showroom Lounge is gone and most of the debris has been removed. Denney expects to be finished as early as April 30, in time for some of property to be used for the International Bar-B-Q Festival May 7-8.