

Downtown plans unveiled — *City planners optimistic about River East development*

By DAVE RANK — Daily News Staff

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There are now pretty pictures but West Bend's River East downtown redevelopment really boils down to one thing: If it's built, will they come?

Tuesday night, the Plan Commission heard a more detailed design scenario for the \$12 million development proposed by developer A.N. Ansay & Associates of Port Washington that will replace the old Field's building and, ultimately, the vacant acreage east of Veterans Avenue.

Last month, the Common Council agreed to sell the 4.04-acre Field's site, which constitutes Tax Incremental Financing (TIF) District 9, to Ansay for \$527,947.

The city plans to demolish the gutted building this year as part of its plan to move Veterans Avenue west to the side of the Milwaukee River, which will give Ansay more room to build outside the unbuildable floodway of the river. The Field's building is the former West Bend Outlet Mall.

"It's a wonderful plan," said commissioner Jed Dolnick. "Nevertheless, I have some questions." Namely, can Ansay find tenants to fill an estimated 60,000 square feet of retail space? "The only thing worse than empty land is to have empty buildings," he said. "That's one nightmare we don't want to have."

With color slides, maps and a virtual reality drive through the proposed project, Ansay's representatives set out to show city planners how it can be done with aggressive marketing and a willingness to adapt construction to fit tenants' needs.

First, the street is moved, then Ansay expects to replace the 50,000-square-foot Field's building with 84,000 square feet of mixed retail and office facilities.

"We have a nice introduction for a long-awaited project," said Mayor Douglas Bade, who showed obvious enthusiasm for Ansay's proposal.

Lawrence Witzling, principal of Planning and Design institute (PDI) Inc. of Milwaukee, was the tour guide for the project's concept plan. PDI helped design the River Shores conversion of the old West Bend Co. site north of TIF 9, has worked on the city's redevelopment of Auxiliary Court just south of the district, and now is completing the puzzle with its site concept for the centerpiece of this city's downtown redevelopment.

At the heart of the Ansay project, Witzling said, are three building areas where Field's and its parking lots now stand which would have up to seven structures, some of which would be three stories tall.

There would be four landscaped parking lots. The two central, plaza-like lots, which separate the three building areas, also would be available for public events. Two eastern lots would be used exclusively for the tenants of the buildings, Witzling said. There would be parking spaces for 191 vehicles in the connected lots. Veterans Avenue would be 36 feet wide, said Amanda Schaefer, PDI associate, allowing two lanes of traffic and 85 parking spaces on both sides of the street.

Between the new street and the river would be an improved River Walk, Witzling said, which would have a "European" look to it. Retail stores would occupy the first floors of the buildings, Witzling said, and the design "has a market concept which will work. We envision a wide variety of retail (stores)."

Ansay wants to start with the central building, Witzling said, but remains flexible to act on potential tenant's or buyers' wishes. The number of buildings built, even the final amount of square feet constructed, will depend on the number and needs of the clients, Witzling said. The 84,000-square-foot estimate now in use, he said, "We think that's the target, that's the starting point."

Both the Riverwalk and the Eisenbahn Trail to the east are seen as assets that will enhance the marketability of the River East project, Witzling said. "We think elements like that can help sell the development," he said.

He also thought landscaping and possibly outdoor sculptures on the River Walk should be included. The idea is to complement the historic downtown, centered on Main Street on the west side of the Milwaukee River, Witzling said, but not to try to duplicate it. The three existing pedestrian bridges over the river are crucial, he said, and shoppers should be drawn to shops and restaurants on both sides.

Ansay also plans to buy from the city the 7.5 acres in TIF 5, where Ansay wants to build a new neighborhood of 39 single-family homes. The sale price on that land is the same as in TIF 9, \$3 per square foot.

Marketing that development will occur simultaneously with the commercial development, said Barbara Eckblad, Realtor with First Weber Group Realtors, West Bend, who is representing Ansay. "That's the intent. We see them as going together in the marketplace."

In a related matter, the 1.5 acre site in TIF 5 facing East Washington Street has an accepted offer, Eckblad said, and the closing on that parcel should be done soon. A financial institution plans to build at that location, several sources have reported. "We're trying to give this an urban, exciting feel," Witzling said of the River East project. "We want this place to be lively. ... Where people will (go) in the evening as well as the daytime."

Bade said he is optimistic that Ansay will be able to begin construction of the first phase of its development before the end of the year.