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Pittsburgh's Three Rivers, Now a Public Attraction

By Christine H. O'Toole

Pittsburgh exists for three reasons: the Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio.

In the 20th century, the banks of those rivers were controlled by industrial behemoths. They largely lost that identity after the waning of the steel industry in the 1980s. Over the last two decades, however, the city's progress in clearing and cleaning its waterfront has created 12 miles of recreational trails, three professional sports stadiums, several boat landings and an influx of nearly 2,000 new downtown residents.

The city has managed to leverage a $124 million investment in publicly accessible riverfront into $4 billion in corporate, public, nonprofit and entertainment development downtown.

That success has renewed a debate that would have been unthinkable in Pittsburgh's polluted industrial heyday: how best to expand public access to the shorelines of the three rivers. Projects proposed for two of the largest tracts left to be developed on the downtown fringe illustrate the opportunities and limits of public-private partnerships.

This month, the city's Urban Redevelopment Authority approved preliminary plans for an $80 million to $90 million investment in new roads, streets and utilities on a 178-acre former industrial site that is the biggest remaining waterfront property in the city. The developers will use a tool called tax increment financing, which earmarks a portion of a site's future property taxes to build its infrastructure. Such financing, approved by both the authority and the City Council on a case-by-case basis, has galvanized redevelopment on Pittsburgh's complex industrial sites.

The latest project, which uses the acronym Almono for the city's three rivers, is a case in point. It envisions a $900 million office, industrial and residential development on a former steel and coke manufacturing site on the Monongahela River that closed in 1997.

In 2002, an alliance of four philanthropies bought the property for $10 million to protect it for postindustrial development. "It was a once-in-a-century opportunity to develop the riverfront, and we thought foundations, as nonprofit owners, could supply patient money," said William P. Getty, president of the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation.

The current Almono partnership comprises the Heinz Endowments, the Benedum Foundation and an affiliate of the Allegheny Conference on Community Development. It is managed by the Regional Industrial Development Corporation of Southwestern Pennsylvania, a nonprofit economic development group.

The former industrial site occupies a strategic location between downtown and two rapidly expanding research institutions, the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon. Both universities lease space in the adjacent Pittsburgh Technology Park. Carnegie Mellon also conducts robotics field testing at the Almono site.

Donald F. Smith Jr., president of the development corporation, says the partnership is talking with both universities about their futures at the site. "The universities are important players," he noted. "They will have space needs for their tech transfer efforts."

Private developers will be asked to submit proposals for four interconnected zones on the Monongahela River that will include two million square feet of office space, research and clean manufacturing, and 1,200 residential units. The master plan developed by the Rothschild Doyno Collaborative, an architecture and urban design firm, calls for alternative technologies for energy generation and storm and wastewater management, along with 25 acres of parks, trails and river access. The design also suggests new uses for a few existing structures, like a rail yard roundhouse and a 1,300-foot-long steel mill.

"Riverfront access, beautification and redevelopment of the entire neighborhood is important," said Jim Richter, executive director of the Hazelwood Initiative, a community development organization.

While plans include continued traffic on a CSX rail line through the site, a proposed highway has been suspended because of its $4 billion price tag and community opposition.

"The Mon-Fayette Expressway kept the site in limbo for 40 years," said Ken Doyno, principal at Rothschild Doyno. "Now there's been a huge cultural shift. It became clear that there was a better use than a highway and industry."

While Almono's plan is moving forward, a different riverfront plan for the Allegheny River recently changed gears.

Last year, the Buncher Company, a real estate developer, announced plans to build Riverfront Landing, a $400 million mixed-use complex on 55 acres next to the Strip District, a downtown market area on the south shore of the Allegheny River. The market and Buncher's site are between 11th Street and 21st Street. They have been included in several public design plans in the last two years that call for a continuous 95-foot space along the river for public use.

Riverlife Pittsburgh, a public-private partnership that guides and advocates waterfront redevelopment, lobbied Buncher to move its complex 95 feet back from the river, citing riverbank erosion and storm water management, as well as aesthetics.

Councilman Patrick Dowd, chairman of the City Council's intergovernmental affairs committee, complained that the city's Urban Redevelopment Authority had been vague about how money from the tax increment financing plan would be used at Buncher's site. Mr. Dowd also said the gated streets at Riverfront Landing would limit city residents' access to the river.

"The rivers have been blocked for too long by industrial sites," he said. "Right now, the city's turning to face the river."

The City Council has approved a special planning district and public access through the Riverfront Landing site, as well as a minimum 70-foot distance back from the river.

But after a six-month standoff with Mr. Dowd, who refused to bring the tax increment financing plan to a vote, Buncher said in early January that it would no longer pursue a $50 million tax increment plan for the site.

"The Buncher Company has earned a highly respected community reputation over the last 60 years and does not wish to participate in a financing program the community views negatively," said Tom Balestrieri, president of Buncher.

Yarone Zober, chairman of the Urban Redevelopment Authority, said he expected the project to proceed without the tax plan, but he said it would probably affect public amenities, like a proposed piazza and a trail.

"Potentially we have lost the opportunity to take tax proceeds from that development and plug them directly into public improvements," he said. "Without the tax increment plan, we'll have to roll up our sleeves."