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As Almono Project Progresses, Hazelwood Revival's in Mix

By Tim Schooley



A billion-dollar balancing act is slowly getting under way in Hazelwood.

As the Regional Industrial Development Corporation of Southwestern Pennsylvania begins preparing a 178-acre former riverfront mill site for roads and infrastructure so that new homes, offices and other buildings can be built, the struggling neighborhood next to it is working to resurrect itself in tandem.

"It takes a lot of hard work to get the city to look at your

neighborhood. Hazelwood's time has come," said Jim Richter, director of the Hazelwood Initiative. "Everybody wishes it was sooner, but development takes a long time."

It's been 10 years since the Heinz Endowments, Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation, McCune Foundation and Richard King Mellon Foundation came together to form the Almono group to buy the former LTV site for \$10 million. The site, one of the region's largest brownfields, has sat dormant

during that time as the project faced on delay after another.

The recession, the property's former developer dropping the project and the uncertainty of the Mon-Fayette Expressway all played roles in the project's slow pace, Richter said.

It's now moving forward. RIDC, selected to manage to process, has developed a master plan led by Strip District-based Rothschild Doyno Collaborative, and is in the process of generating \$90 million in tax increment financing to prepare

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the site for an estimated \$1 billion in development. On May 28th, the City Planning Commission approved both a zoning change and the preliminary plan.

The plan calls for more than 600,000 square feet of industrial space and about 2.1 million square feet of mixed-use office and commercial space. It also involves building more than 1,200 homes.

Don Smith, president of RIDC, said 1- local and national housing developers have expressed interest, and RIDC has invited housing proposals.

"Pittsburgh's residential market is very hot right now," he said. "I think probably every single residential developer in the city has responded."

That includes Trek Development Group, which is building housing in Uptown and pursuing a \$20 million project in Braddock.

"We're looking at Hazelwood, but we don't have a project yet,"

Trek President Bill Gatti said.

Yet, one of the challenges will be ensuring the new construction is designed in such a way it enhances rather than separates the surrounding community. Richter noted the housing needs to be affordable, warning it could become an enclave separated from the neighborhood's lower-valued homes if it isn't.

"Our plan was very purposeful in trying to integrate our site in with the rest of the community fabric," Smith said.

At the same time, the Heinz Endowments is working with the established Hazelwood community for its first "place-based" strategy to focus coordinated attention on the community's needs. Last fall, Heinz awarded \$2.35 million in grants to Hazelwood projects, more than half of it to the Center of Life community organization to expand its family and youth programs.

"This is not a short-term

commitment," said Robert Vagt, president of the Heinz Endowments. "But I hope what you really see is a little bounce in the step of the people who live there. That's the real marker."

Several other initiatives are under way in the community, including a Main Street corridor study and a neighborhood revitalization strategy being implemented by the Pittsburgh Community Reinvestment Group.

Matt Smuts, a University of California, Berkeley-trained architect who has lived in Hazelwood for 10 years, in conducting the property inventory, called Reimagining Neighborhoods Initiative, as an employee of PCRG.

"I think I have been frustrated with the pace of progress," he said. "I think I always felt like the Almono site was going to eventually be developed, even if I didn't know exactly when."