

Scribner Place celebration at hand

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Speakers are limited to two minutes at Monday's groundbreaking ceremony for New Albany's YMCA and public aquatic center. But when you ask around, it sounds like two seconds would be fine.

"You're basically saying, 'Yay!'" said Jane Alcorn, a member of the groundbreaking committee.

Asked for his reaction to the event's arrival, Mayor James Garner, one of the planned speakers, swept a hand across his forehead: "Whew!"

The history of the Scribner Place development project takes more than a breath to describe.

"I guess it's an understatement to say we're excited about it. It's been four years," said Joe LaRocca, executive director of the YMCA of Southern Indiana. "We knew it was going to happen, we just didn't expect it to take this long."

Early plans for Scribner Place involved condominiums, a shopping plaza, a Montessori school, an Olympic-caliber swimming pool, and a raised walkway crossing over the railroad tracks and connecting to the top of the flood levee.

New Albany had committed \$400,000 a year in economic-development funds and unsuccessfully sought a matching amount from Floyd County, said John Rosenbarger, New Albany's head of redevelopment. It became apparent that — even with a larger pledge from the Caesars Foundation of Floyd County — the scope would have to be narrowed.

Pooled resources

Once the current project received bids from construction companies, another obstacle emerged: Banks were wary of the joint operating agreement between New Albany and the YMCA. The city owns the land, and both organizations own the building, so prospective financial backers wanted to see the equivalent of a prenuptial agreement between the parties — in case the partnership ever went sour, who would own what part of the building?

"It was on a pretty steep up and down cycle for a while," Rosenbarger said.

The kinks eventually were ironed out, bonds were sold for the \$20 million project and Stevens Contractors fired up bulldozers last month to begin the general construction process.

Even though ground has technically been broken, LaRocca said that makes the ceremony more significant.

"We're not just breaking ground in the hopes that equipment will move in," LaRocca said.

"I am glad it's here for the people of our community," Garner said of the groundbreaking. "You can go all the way back to [Mayor] Bob Real and 1991 when he looked at putting something at the bottom of State Street.

Now, 15 years later, it's here. It's a great project for our community."

Alcorn recalled volunteers circulating petitions when it looked as though the City Council might vote to pull the project's funding this summer.

"You knew there was that grassroots support," Alcorn said.

The next episode

After the shovels are wiped off, visible changes are expected from month to month, Rosenbarger said.

Foundation walls are due up in March, according to Stevens' projections, and a steel skeleton could be in place by May.

By then, amid a city election campaign, there may already be conversations about what a second phase of

Scribner Place, if any, should include. The city owns land adjoining the current property to the east.

“My guess would be a hotel, No. 1, though you’d need to see a point of attraction,” Rosenbarger said. Another option could be a multi-use building with river-view condominiums on the upper floors.

Whatever happens, don’t expect the city to launch projects of Scribner Place’s magnitude on a regular basis.

“It’s a large-scale investment, but I don’t think that’ll be a trend downtown,” Rosenbarger said. “More exciting would be smaller things happening incrementally.”

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