

Cincinnati: Many Rivers Run Through It

Susan Paddock

Attendees at ICMA's 86th Annual Conference 2000 in September, held in Cincinnati/ Hamilton County, will see that the Ohio River is a fascinating local asset. Downtown and riverfront development means that more attractions are yet to come.

Cincinnati always has been defined by its relationship to the Ohio River. This enviable river location symbolizes the success Cincinnati enjoys as an ever-changing place to live, work, and play. Cincinnati's early development was a direct result of its access to the river because commerce thrives in a location with a transportation advantage.

Growth and development in the downtown and on the riverfront reflect the "rivers" that now flow through the city, as well as next to it. Cincinnati's rivers of vitality, tradition, information, creativity, and opportunity demonstrate the city's advantages not only in transportation but also in quality of life, historic preservation, technology, the arts, and development.

River of Vitality

Streams of people living, working, and playing in Cincinnati contribute to its urban environment. In particular, the city's broad-ranging, well-planned housing options create a 24-hour city full of vitality. Eugenie Birch, professor and chair of the department of city and regional planning at the University of Pennsylvania, has compared housing trends in 40 cities from 1990 to 1999. She found in her 1999 study "Downtown Living: A Deeper Look" that Cincinnati had one of the more robust markets in downtown housing in the United States.

"Cincinnati is one of the brighter stories," Ms. Birch says. "For years, people said the downtown population was vanishing but what we're finding is that that does not hold out to be true. What people were reflecting anecdotally—that more people were moving back downtown—really was happening in some cities like Cincinnati."

Cincinnati's numerous housing projects are responses to the city's incredible demand for downtown living, a demand that comes from a broad spectrum of people. Cincinnati also has recognized that, without city government assistance, the projects needed to meet this demand might never have happened. Tax abatement, low-interest loans, and infrastructure improvements

are just some of the types of funding assistance the city has offered for the projects discussed here.

New Housing Sparks Demand

The Gramercy, the first stage of the Garfield Housing Master Plan, was completed and opened for tenants in 1994. It contains 148 apartments and townhouses, a heated swimming pool, ground-level retail uses, and a city-owned 450-space parking garage. The success of this \$22 million project has attracted the development of other downtown housing.

In 1995, Greenwich on the Park, a 64-unit apartment development, was completed along Piatt Park across from the Gramercy. In addition to the apartments, this \$9.7 million development includes 49 parking spaces and 1,800 square feet of retail space.

Recognizing the need to add more loft housing to downtown living, the 42-unit Groton Lofts project was completed and fully leased by February 1997. A new 7,500-square-foot Redfish restaurant also opened in the street-level space in the same year.

Renovation Helps Address Need

Investors and developers have successfully renovated older, vacant buildings into usable space to meet market demands. One of these projects, Shillito Place, challenged the city, in partnership with a developer, to convert the old Lazarus department store (800,000 square feet) into a mixed-use development.

The residential component of 98 loft units was completed in October 1999, and tenants began moving into the building in November. This award-winning project demonstrates the opportunities that larger downtown buildings offer. It also has stimulated additional development, including the conversion of the Baker Shoe Store commercial building immediately south of Shillito Place into 18 residential units.

Other projects have included the adaptive reuse of a class-B office building at 11-15 East Eighth Street into a mixed-use development of four luxury rental units and offices. A private joint venture is redeveloping the Old Grandpa Soap building into 45 loft units. Another manufacturing facility, the Power Building, is being converted into 115 units.

A \$27 million renovation, being made in conjunction with the University of Cincinnati, is progressing on the 90-year-old Emery Theatre and the adjacent facility of the Ohio College of Applied Sciences. College classrooms are being converted into 62 large apartments, street-level retail spaces, and resident parking. When the Emery Theatre is renovated, it will have 1,700 seats.

Rehabilitation and New Construction Are Key

For many years, Cincinnati has been working in the Betts-Longworth Historic District, an area close to City Hall, primarily rehabilitating existing properties. The city also has assisted in the financing of about 200 units on 50 properties in this section. In 1992, it was determined that the remaining buildings were no longer salvageable, and a new tack of demolition and new construction was taken.

The first major development was the Longworth Square Townhouses. This project consisted of 60 new townhouses, which were sold before construction was completed. Then, the city's partnership with the Home Builders' Association of Greater Cincinnati led to the development known as CiTiRAMA® I on Mound Street in 1997.

Of these 11 new homes, nine were sold before the show, and the remaining by the end of the first week of the show. At CiTiRAMA® II in 1998, all nine show homes were pre-sold, and all 31 lots were sold before the show. The last of the 31 homes was completed in 1999. The next CiTiRAMA® will add another 27 homes and will complete the development of new, market-rate housing on both sides of the 900 block of Mound Street.

During the past 10 years, other new construction has occurred on Elizabeth Street in the Betts-Longworth district and along other streets in this now-vibrant downtown living community. The success of these efforts indicates the strong market for new single-family housing in Cincinnati's downtown and near-downtown sections.

Healthy Office Market Grows

The office market in downtown Cincinnati remains a healthy one, particularly for class-A space, which is down to an impressive 5 percent vacancy rate. The lack of premium space contributed to the recent announcement by Delta Airlines that it will construct a new reservations facility in order to remain in downtown Cincinnati after considering sites in the suburbs.

When constructed, the proposed multimillion-dollar facility is slated to be a world-class reservations call center and to serve as a state-of-the-art workplace for 1,000 Delta employees, complete with exclusive on-site parking, easy access to the interstate highways, and an efficient office layout to enhance employees' comfort and productivity. Plans call for the new building to be completed before Delta's current lease expires in July 2001.

In 1995, a partnership among Hamilton County, the Cincinnati School District, and Cincinnati resulted in three major office projects. In 1996, the school district completed the renovation of its former Merry Middle School building on Burnet Avenue for new administrative offices. In 1997, the county completed

an award-winning \$25 million renovation of the district's former Courter Education Center downtown.

Renamed the William Howard Taft Center, the 180,000-square-foot building houses two courts, offices of the Hamilton County prosecuting attorney and the public defender, and several smaller departments. Currently, the former Hale-Justis Drug Company building is being renovated and converted to apartments by a private developer in cooperation with Cincinnati's Department of Economic Development.

In 1995, Hamilton County also completed an historically sensitive \$25 million renovation of the former Alms & Doepke department store building. This 275,000-square-foot building houses the main offices of Hamilton County's Department of Human Services.

The project's success encouraged Hamilton County to complete the 1999 construction of Alms & Doepke Parkhaus, a 700-car parking garage located behind the human services department, which served as a catalyst for further development in the neighboring Over-the-Rhine area. Monthly parking is available to the public, along with daily and hourly parking for visitors to the courts and county offices in the immediate area. Much-needed secure parking in the evening also is provided for patrons of the Main Street entertainment district adjacent to the garage.

Retail, Convention Business Vibrant

Fountain Place, the recently completed 205,000-square-foot, \$68 million retail center, coupled with a \$5 million renovation of Saks Fifth Avenue, has enhanced the shopping experience in downtown Cincinnati. The new center includes a Lazarus department store, Tiffany & Company, Brooks Brothers, and Palomino Euro Bistro as its major tenants.

The Dr. Albert B. Sabin Cincinnati Convention Center was host in 1999 to 669 events attracting 363,300 attendees. The continued success of Cincinnati's convention center has so impressed business and community leaders that renovation and expansion of the center has been proposed, and Cincinnati has taken a leadership role in making final plans for the expanded center. The mayor has called for a special task force of the "best minds" of Cincinnati to provide a full review of the size, location, and sources of funding needed to complete the project.

Current plans call for the existing 551,750-square-foot facility to triple its size, to 1.6 million square feet. The expanded facility will allow greater Cincinnati to host 33 more events annually and to attract 274,000 more attendees.

River of Information

Underneath the city runs a current of technology. According to Yahoo! Internet Life magazine, Cincinnati is one of the most-wired cities in the United States. The region is a band-width boomtown, giving residents and businesses cutting-edge choices to meet their communication needs. Not only is cable-modem technology available, but also DSL technology (high-speed voice and data transmission over the existing telecommunications network) is available to more than 70 percent of residents and businesses, making greater Cincinnati one of the best-served cities in the nation for this technology.

In addition, Cincinnati is home to ZoomTown—a next-generation, high-bandwidth elements monitoring center that is a testing ground for new Internet services. It delivers an extremely high-speed, reliable network on which dot-coms and Internet service providers (ISPs) can run their businesses.

The community's sophisticated, leading-edge communications network is an economic-development treasure. It has been the impetus for several major businesses to locate or expand their operations here. Thanks to this important digital asset, the historic Main Street entertainment district in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood, as well as the West Fourth Street "digital corridor," are experiencing a rebirth as a burgeoning community of e-commerce businesses.

River of Creativity

Arts programs and facilities flow in downtown Cincinnati. Opened in 1995, the \$82 million Aronoff Center for the Performing Arts, the result of a public/private partnership, attracts more than 350,000 patrons annually. With three theaters and an art gallery, the center hosts a wide range of events, including touring Broadway shows, the Cincinnati Ballet, community theater, and concerts.

This facility served as a catalyst for the emerging Backstage Entertainment District, which represents a \$3 million city investment in alley and streetscape improvements. Indian, seafood, Scottish, Thai, and steakhouse dining are just some of the options offered by the dozen restaurants that have opened in this district.

Cincinnati always has been proud of its Contemporary Arts Center (CAC), which celebrated its 60th anniversary this past year. In May 1999, an agreement was executed between the city and the CAC to relocate this downtown gallery from its current location to across the street from the Aronoff Center.

The world-renowned architectural firm of Zaha Hadid, based in London, teamed up with KZF, a local architectural firm, to design the new center, which already has been hailed internationally as "a breakthrough" and "a landmark

rupture in architectural history.” The new facility will serve more than 120,000 visitors and contribute at least \$11 million annually to the local economy.

River of Tradition

As the oldest public marketplace in Ohio, Findlay Market lends a historic significance to Cincinnati that has been well recognized. Since 1852, Findlay Market has been home to hundreds of small businesses, has anchored a struggling inner-city neighborhood, and has brought bustle and great food to Cincinnati’s downtown. This mission is as relevant today as when Findlay’s cornerstone was laid.

Findlay Market Tradition Continues

Cincinnati recognizes that Findlay Market is an important asset and has initiated the Findlay Market Revitalization Project to protect and preserve it. As the lead partner in the project, the city is investing \$10.6 million in a four-phase revitalization of Findlay’s retail infrastructure. The market now has a new playground and parking facilities, a new North Retail addition, and a 24-stall Farmers’ Market shed.

Projects affiliated with Findlay Market’s physical revitalization include the city’s first micro-enterprise development program for neighborhood residents, plus youth employment projects to create “art in the market” and self-employment opportunities. Philanthropies have joined in the partnership, and gifts now are being donated to this revitalization project. Working together, Cincinnati and the private donors will ensure the continuation of Findlay Market traditions.

Fountain Crowns the Downtown

The restoration of the Tyler Davidson Fountain represents the city’s commitment to maintaining its facilities and infrastructure. The downtown fountain is the symbol of the city, and city leaders want to make sure that this extraordinary landmark remains a prominent fixture for generations to come.

In February 1998, the city hired Harry Weese Associates to analyze the existing condition of the 129-year-old fountain and to prepare recommendations for remedial actions. Nationally recognized for landmark preservation and for the restoration of historic fountains, the Weese team found the fountain in a state of severe decline; it would have to be totally restored if the city wanted to keep its landmark for future generations.

Because the fountain was originally donated to the people of Cincinnati, governing officials invited the public to participate in its restoration efforts. A fund-raising effort, led by Charles Lindberg, raised more than \$3 million for the restoration project. The fountain is being restored in its entirety: foundation, basin, pumps, electric power, and the sculpture itself.

As of this writing, the fountain had been scheduled for rededication on May 6, 2000. That weekend a festival of concerts, street vending, and fireworks ushered in the new millennium as Cincinnati celebrated the rebuilding of its riverfront and downtown.

River of Opportunity

The riverfront that resulted in Cincinnati's early success and sustained its growth now is the site of significant redevelopment opportunities.

In 1996, Cincinnati and Hamilton County undertook a joint master-plan effort for the central portion of Cincinnati's downtown riverfront. This was done after Hamilton County voters had passed a one-half-cent sales tax for the construction of two professional sports stadiums, one for the Cincinnati Bengals and one for the Cincinnati Reds. The critical repositioning of these two stadiums opened up the central riverfront for further development.

Master Plan for Riverfront Renewal

The master plan for the riverfront calls for several cultural and entertainment attractions, retail uses, offices, hotel(s), and housing, in addition to the stadiums. The revitalization will include two levels of structured parking for up to 8,000 spaces; the total reconstruction of Cincinnati's downtown urban expressway, known as Fort Washington Way; and the reclamation of approximately 15 acres of land that was formerly part of the expressway system, for redevelopment.

The ambitious plan also includes the construction of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, the building of a new eastern riverfront garage of approximately 1,200 spaces, and the introduction of a grand mixed-use development called "the Banks" above the structured parking. The Banks will include up to 1,300 residential units, 400,000 to 550,000 square feet of retail and entertainment uses, 1.1 to 2.2 million square feet of class-A office space, and 200 to 400 hotel rooms.

The master plan also details a 55-acre park consisting of a great lawn, a festival event space, a permanent facility for major downtown events like Oktoberfest-Zinzinnati and Taste of Cincinnati, a playground with a carousel, large interactive fountains, a continuous bike path, and an accessible walk along the entire length of the riverfront.

Citizen Buy-In Drives Success

The Banks development was proposed by a group of 16 private citizens called the Riverfront Advisory Commission, appointed jointly by the Hamilton County Commissioners and the Cincinnati City Council in February 1999. The Banks plan, which was announced in September 1999, has been incorporated into the overall master plan from Urban Design Associates (UDA).

The entire riverfront planning process has involved hundreds of stakeholder groups and citizens from all over the region. UDA originally held individual meetings with approximately 50 stakeholder groups when it began its work in the fall of 1996, and it has continued to keep these stakeholders involved throughout the entire planning process. The riverfront advisers held a series of regionwide public forums before, during, and after its planning process for the Banks plan.

Meanwhile, several of the major projects are well on their way to completion. Fort Washington Way, which began as a major investment study in 1996 through 1997, will be completed in August of this year, at a total cost of \$314 million. Fort Washington Way was designed in 1950 to provide downtown interchange access for Cincinnati, the city of Covington, and the city of Newport. The reconfiguration project, which actually narrows the roadway, will reconnect the downtown with the riverfront and dramatically improve safety and capacity.

This project also will feature a number of additional improvements, including a Riverfront Transit Center that will provide the link between regional transportation systems and riverfront development. It is designed to accommodate bus traffic and staging areas, as well as potential future rail-transportation alternatives.

Connections to intercity rail stations also are planned. Nowhere in the United States has a major reconstruction of a federal interstate highway taken place so quickly or with such a level of partnership and cooperation. This project has evolved as a partnership among the tri-state region's transportation agencies—including the Ohio Department of Transportation, the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet, the Federal Highway Administration, and the Southwest Ohio Regional Transit Authority—plus the Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana Council of Governments, and the Cincinnati and Hamilton County governments. All of the region's political, downtown, and business entities have become partners. The state of Kentucky is even helping to pay for transportation improvements in Ohio!

Another major component—the Cincinnati Bengals Stadium—is well on its way to completion in August of this year. The public streets around it, including Pete Rose Way, Central Avenue, Mehring Way, and Elm Street, also will be finished by August.

The Cincinnati Reds are the oldest professional baseball team in the world. The team's new ballpark will be an open-air facility, with natural grass, containing approximately 45,000 seats. It will anchor the eastern end of the riverfront, along with a new Reds Hall of Fame and some retail stores.

Both the new Cincinnati Reds Stadium and the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center will open in April 2003. The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center will be a national museum commemorating the history and events of the Underground Railroad in the United States and will be sited in the center of the new riverfront, at the head of the John A. Roebling Suspension Bridge.

An eastern parking garage being built by Hamilton County adjacent to the One Lytle Apartments and the sports/entertainment Firststar Center is scheduled for completion this summer. Phase 1 of the street grid, which includes the connection from the suspension bridge along the new Theodore M. Berry Way to Race Street, will be finished by December.

All in all, the Cincinnati riverfront development is probably the most complex urban waterfront development in the country. The two new stadiums, family entertainment and cultural attractions, mixed-use developments, associated parking and infrastructure, and new waterfront park will, in total, exceed \$2 billion in combined public and private investment. It may make the Cincinnati riverfront and the Cincinnati–northern Kentucky region the cultural and entertainment gateway of the mid-eastern United States.

Cincinnati, like the Ohio River, whose banks it shares, is timeless. Look closely and you will see that, like the river, it is always moving. Its tributaries of vitality, tradition, information, creativity, and opportunity combine to form a mighty current—a torrent of positive change now and for generations to come.

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