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After A Decade Of Delays, Front Street Beginning

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After a decade of delays, three developers and downsized plans, Front Street — the restaurant and entertainment hub of Adriaen's Landing in downtown Hartford — is finally rising from a long desolate lot on Columbus Boulevard.

Girders are being welded together into a steel framework that many hope will eventually morph into a vibrant, pedestrian-friendly link for visitors and residents between the convention center area near the river and the rest of downtown.

"This is an important element in helping development along Columbus Boulevard become viable," said Tyler Smith, a Hartford architect and a longtime advocate of planning to create a more vibrant city. "Right now, there's a sense that it's just an appendage of downtown and not a part of it."

Even though construction is well underway, the project will still face significant obstacles as the state comes out of a recession. Leases still must be signed, even as Greater Hartford and the city of Hartford have seen rising retail vacancies.

Front Street also is envisioned as a pedestrian-friendly area in the middle of an area that walkers still have difficulty negotiating easily. And the city has not had consistent success with small-scale development, for example, on Pratt Street.

Neighborhood groups, however, say they are pleased with the design of Front Street because it will blend well with the surrounding area and provide jobs.

"It's not a walled city and that's really important," said Carol Colburn, executive director of The Coalition to Strengthen the Sheldon/Charter Oak Neighborhood Inc. "It won't be turning its back on the neighborhood. It will be part of the neighborhood. It won't be another Constitution Plaza."

The original Front Street, a neighborhood populated by Italians and other immigrant groups, was razed to make way for Constitution Plaza in the 1960s, which was elevated above street level and, until recent



Danny Krawiec, left, and Kevin Kehoe, right, work at the Front Street development. Krawiec is from Attleboro, Mass. and Kehoe is from Manchester. (Ross Taylor / Hartford Courant / August 10, 2009)

years, isolated from the rest of downtown Hartford.

Construction of the first phase of Front Street is expected to be completed in June 2010 at a cost of \$30 million, a third of which is being paid by the state.

When finished, there will be about 65,000 square feet of commercial space that the Greenwich-based developer, The HB Nitkin Group, hopes to lease to restaurants and entertainment venues. The venues could host smaller concerts in a nightclub setting or, perhaps, a dinner theater.

The cost doesn't include a four-story, 280-space parking garage on the site that is being built by the state at the same time, at a cost of \$13 million. In all, the state is paying \$23 million of the \$43 million in this, the first phase of Front Street.

Nitkin does not yet have any leases for the space, but does have a long-standing commitment from ESPN to participate in the project. ESPN confirmed its continued interest Monday but said it must first see other tenants taking space before it signs a formal lease.

"We need to know from them that they have other tenants," ESPN spokesman Mike Soltys said.

What exactly ESPN has in mind wasn't clear and Soltys declined to elaborate except to say that the sports media company has "ideas." Soltys stressed that it would not be an ESPN "Sports Zone" like it operates in larger cities.

Subsequent phases might eventually include 200 apartments — plans that were delayed because of the recession — and additional retail space. The apartment construction would incorporate the abandoned Hartford Times building on Prospect Street, which has been envisioned all along as a part of Front Street.

If construction stays on track for the first phase, the space would be ready five years after the opening of the convention center across Columbus Boulevard. Originally, it was hoped that the convention center and Front Street would open at the same time, providing dining and entertainment options for conventioners.

Since the late 1990s and then-Gov. John G. Rowland's push to revitalize Hartford in his "Six Pillars of Progress" program, a series of major development projects in the city has been completed. Front Street — part of that vision — has foundered and downsized, partly because of complications in financing a project using both private and public funds.

Peter J. Christian, development director at Nitkin, said that the firm is having discussions with potential tenants, but acknowledged that the recession and uncertainty about whether the economy has yet hit bottom is making restaurant owners wary about expansion.

"We hope that the economy is improving when we come on line," Christian said. "Most restaurants now are certainly being careful in what they are doing and if they are expanding, they are doing it carefully."

Nevertheless, Front Street provides tenants with a brand new space that they can make all their own, Christian said.

For years, there has been skepticism about whether Front Street would ever be built.

But William McCue, chairman of the Capital City Economic Development Authority, which has overseen the "Six Pillars" developments, said if there was any doubt, there shouldn't be anymore.

"I would say based on what the Nitkin Group is doing in the face of what is going on in the economy," McCue said, "that's got to make a believer out of anyone."