

River District re-do revs up

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Josh Birks, city of Fort Collins economic health director, is pictured along the Poudre River at the Linden Street Bridge on Tuesday.

By the numbers: Poudre River District

- Parcels: 38
- Owners: 20+
- Buildings: 89,645 square feet
- Land: 17.58 acres
- Maximum building height: Five stories with the first story stepped down from the river and street frontages
- Incentives: Downtown Development Authority (tax increment financing)

The projects

Four projects are either pending or been approved on the banks of the Poudre River in downtown Fort Collins. Here's a look:

- Encompass Technologies, 418 Linden St. (known as Block 1). A 37,000-square-foot, four-story building featuring Encompass Technologies office space, a restaurant and 12 apartments.
- Legacy Senior Residences between Linden and Pine streets. 72 one- and two-bedroom apartments for seniors age 62 and older whose incomes are between 30 and 60 percent of the area's median income.
- CSU Engines and Energy Conversion Laboratory, 430 N. College Ave. An \$18.5 million, 65,000 square-foot expansion that will contain lab space, offices and support space.
- Link-N-Greens, 100 acres at the corner of Lincoln and Lemay avenues being developed by Allen Ginsborg of NewMark Merrill, Fort Collins. Woodward of Fort Collins is considering expanding its corporate headquarters from Drake Road to the downtown site.

Few things impassion Fort Collins residents more than the Poudre River.

Vital to those who love it, businesses that make their living on it and farmers who nourish their crops with it, the Poudre River is also the lifeblood of a city that underscores its importance to downtown development.

The draw of the river has long been seen as a catalyst to extend Old Town beyond College Avenue.

A 4-year-old city plan that sets the groundwork for the area's redevelopment has largely played out behind the scenes until this year, when four projects began shining new light on the Poudre River District.

What is it?

The River District has official boundaries 17.5 acres bordered by Pine Street on the north, Lincoln Avenue on the south, Jefferson Street on the west and the river on the east, but unofficially, it's viewed as the area north and east of Old Town all the way to the Mulberry Bridge. It encompasses the Lincoln triangle, breweries,

historic Buckingham neighborhood and the original fort that became the foundation of the city.

Currently, the area is home to longstanding industrial businesses, several vacant buildings and largely unused parking lots. It's also home to trails, natural areas and breweries including Odell Brewing, Fort Collins Brewery and New Belgium Brewing Co.

There's no question many would like to see some things change.

"I'm one that has felt we haven't had sufficient development along that corridor," said longtime Fort Collins businessman Loren Maxey. "It's just drab. ... There are sections along there that are just not scenic, not pleasant or enjoyable."

While Fort Collins Economic Health Director Josh Birks agrees change is needed, people have different ideas for what should happen. "We have to have a community conversation so we make sure we are heading in the direction that a large number of folks see as beneficial," he said.

The vision, as laid out in the River District Plan, is a place that combines the river, industry, art and history to create a hip and varied new community.

"It's a real opportunity to extend the feeling we have downtown both to the north toward the (Colorado State University) engines lab and east toward Walmart, not in the sense of replicating downtown but creating that energy," said Wynne Odell, co-founder of Odell Brewing Co. and member of the Downtown Development Authority board of directors helping promote and develop the river district.

The vision "is all in our imaginations at this point as we try to envision what it will look like," she said. "There's been no energy behind (the area) for a long time."

Though less than a mile from Old Town, the breweries are separated in reality and perception by Jefferson Street — Colorado Highway 14 — a psychological barrier of sorts that keeps many pedestrians from traversing the busy road. "It's not far away, but it's an obvious barrier," Odell said.

Birks said locals and visitors create "mental maps" of all there is to do when they come downtown. "There's a density of activity," he said. "There's a lower density of activity and focal points that make people less willing" to travel across Jefferson Street.

The challenge is to make it a "no-brainer" for people to cross the river, Odell said.

Incorporating the past

Bruce Hendee, chief sustainability officer for the city, worked on the original river district plan through his former company, BHA Design. He sees an opportunity to instill the "cool factor" in the district — a chance to celebrate and incorporate the city's history into redevelopment.

The core of the district near Linden and Willow Streets was instrumental in the settlement of the city. Its military post was established in 1864.

Throughout the years the property had been used for housing, flour milling, retail, farming and ranching, lodging, animal feed production and the city dump, according to the city. One topographical change included

the channelization of the river between Linden Street and Lincoln Avenue. That relocated the river from the site now known as Oxbow to the south, according to the river district plan.

As redevelopment occurs, the plan includes a metaphoric water feature running along Willow Street that can be used for urban interpretation and historic interpretation, although it would have a thin ribbon of water, Hendee said. "It could be a very, very neat place."

With construction under way on the engines lab expansion, Bas Bleu theatre getting ready for redevelopment, The Museum of Discovery opening next month and other projects, "the whole area is beginning to take shape," said Hendee, acknowledging that fully realizing the river district vision "will take as long as it takes for property owners to get engaged and want to do something."

Those behind the plan can imagine Old Town as a kind of mall with Old Town Square serving as an anchor on one end and New Belgium on Linden Street as the other, with interesting things in between and the midpoint a water feature funded by Art in Public Places.

Catalyst for change

Despite their desire, the city and DDA can only do so much to reinvigorate the district. Birks said the city can help shape change through strategic investments in infrastructure, and by partnering with private developers on key "catalyst" projects. Three projects are on the books; one is pending.

Last month, the DDA approved directing \$564,799 in tax increment financing for software development company Encompass Technologies to create an office building with a restaurant and apartments at 418 Linden St. The money will go toward facade features, improvements to the public right of way and stabilization of the nearby river bank.

The board also approved \$64,570 for street enhancements along Linden Street in front of the building.

"Sometimes you need to step further into the public/private partnership to demonstrate the infrastructure is there and there's a reason (for the private sector) to invest," Birks said. The city did it with the North College Marketplace to spur redevelopment in North Fort Collins, and with Capstone Development, which is building a student housing project at Prospect and College.

And, it will do it with the 100-acre Link-N-Greens site if Woodward chooses to expand its corporate headquarters there.

The city and DDA are hanging their hats on the Woodward deal, a project that could set the course for the rest of the district and parts of Old Town. Redevelopment of Link-N-Greens, sandwiched between Lincoln Avenue and Mulberry Street, is considered a key redevelopment site.

Woodward won't make a decision on expansion until next year, but CEO Tom Gendron said in an earlier interview that the site could be the stimulus that drives redevelopment in the river district and on Mulberry. "Obviously, we would be on the corner and that would be a start."

Should Woodward move to Link-N-Greens, it would bring with it an increased need for hotel space. Like a set of dominoes with one piece dependent on the other, the DDA has delayed a decision on a downtown hotel until it knows whether Woodward would be its neighbor.

“If we are at that site I would love to see a very nice hotel and convention center,” Gendron said. “It would be good for Woodward, Old Town and the community.”

What now?

Not everyone believes development along the river is the best course of action.

Citing other cities that have developed right up to riverbanks, Gary Wockner of Save the Poudre, said the opportunity in Fort Collins is different. “That is to have somewhat of a healthy, functioning river corridor flowing through the community,” he said. “The general goal is to keep development at some reasonable distance away from the river bank.”

Save the Poudre would like to see development set back at least 200 feet from the Poudre’s banks. It opposes planned senior housing and Encompass projects in the district.

“Neither of those projects at this time, are in our opinion, enhancing the river corridor. Rather they are exploiting and degrading the river.” Wockner is “cautiously optimistic” the Woodward project “is going to protect the river and perhaps even enhance its natural ecosystem.”

Fort Collins’ Natural Areas department is currently studying the river along with scientists from CSU, the U.S. Forest Service and Nature Conservancy to understand the river’s behavior under different circumstances. “It will ultimately be a tool to help the public understand how the river functions and to have discussions about what we want and how we can get there for the river health,” said Jennifer Shanahan, a city environmental planner.

“We have a lot of city documents that show we want a sustainable river and a healthy river ... this will help us lay out a road map to get there,” she said.

Betty Aragon, unofficial spokeswoman for the historic Buckingham neighborhood, said her only concerns about river district plans are for how they impact the neighborhood, including traffic. “Otherwise, I think actually improving the area around the river would be a good thing. Now the river is not so great to look at.”

Aragon opposed Pat Stryker’s now defunct plan to build a music amphitheater on the Oxbow property next to New Belgium several years ago because of the noise and traffic it would bring. But revitalizing the river district, even if it brings some more traffic, would also “bring more options for folks who live closer to the neighborhood.” But she doesn’t want to see bars come in. “I’m for restaurants, not bars.”

Fort Collins Brewery owner Tom Peters envisions some development along the river to help draw people from Old Town. “We got here in ’93 and saw the river and said, ‘It’s great, it’s natural, but no one from town knows it’s there. It would be nice to see limited development where people could take an afternoon, go down by the river in a relaxing sort of atmosphere.”

Developing the river district is not about “getting up as many buildings as we can and accessing the Poudre,” Odell said. “That doesn’t fit into the vision.” But seeing a plan like Woodward’s, that protects the river, “would bring downtown in this direction.”

Once the city knows what the Natural Areas study shows and what the community wants, it could possibly find grant money to help make it happen, Birks said.

