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On the waterfront: Plenty of progress, more to come (Video)



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Among the heavy influx of construction cranes and bulldozers along Buffalo's waterfront, local leaders see more development opportunities, including the proposed take over of the Outer Harbor property by the **Erie Canal Harbor Development Corp.** and city of Buffalo.

Many view the nearly 400-acre property that is nestled between Fuhrmann Boulevard and Lake Erie as the next phase in what has become a deep pool of waterfront-related developments.

The fate and the future of the Outer Harbor was the forefront of a 90-minute Business First "Power Breakfast" on Friday that focused on the waterfront. Panelists included: [Cliff Benson](#), **Buffalo Sabres** chief development officer; [Robert Gioia](#), Erie Canal Harbor Development Corp. chairman; [John Koelmel](#), HarborCenter president; [Peg Overdorf](#), Valley Community Association executive director; and [Craig Slater](#), a Buffalo attorney whose clients include FFZ Holdings LLC, owners of several key waterfront parcels.

Gioia said while three main issues remain — one being the cost of remediating the Outer Harbor land — he hopes a formal transfer of the property from the **Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority** to the ECHDC and Buffalo will happen soon. Key environmental issues, including clean-up costs, could be resolved within the next month.

"It will happen, but the timing is a little uncertain because of the environmental issues," Gioia said.

Once the land is acquired, no matter how it is developed, public access will be a key factor, Gioia stressed.

"We're convinced that a lot of the land will be available to everyone," he said. "We're not about putting a Walmart or Kmart on the waterfront."

Waterfront development is moving at a fast pace with both multiple projects well underway.

"It has to be a public/private partnership," Gioia said of waterfront developments.

The Sabres have fast-tracked the \$172 million HarborCenter project, with a targeted September 2014 opening date for the first phase of the sports/entertainment complex.



Robert Gioia and Peg Overdorf discuss Buffalo's developing waterfront.

Benson said he hopes the rapid pace of HarborCenter's development will serve as a template for other waterfront projects.

"We have to stop thinking that things take a long time to get done," Benson said. "We need to get at it, now."

Meanwhile, Benderson Development, by December, will have completed the \$30 million transformation of the former Donovan State Office Building into the One Canalside Building.

"Don't sell this area short," Koelmel said. "There are (private sector) risk takers in this community."

The ECHDC hopes to have its East Canal urban park completed by the winter.

FFZ is looking at residential-based development plans for the former Lake Erie Freight House along Ohio Street, which will also undergo an upgrade, and that development group is looking at various options for a Furhmann Boulevard grain mill it bought at auction in early June.

"The mill represents a great opportunity for us," Slater said.

The construction activity, coupled with waterfront concerts presented by **Buffalo Place Inc.** and Funtime Presents along with other investments has helped bring more people to the Canalside District, Central Wharf and the Outer Harbor.

The ECHDC, with Buffalo Place, is putting on more than 700 events this year along the waterfront. They expect more than 500,000 people to make their way to the water's edge.

"On any weekend, you see hundreds of people in kayaks along the Buffalo River," Overdorf said. "When I was a kid, you never, ever saw anyone on the Buffalo River."

James Fink covers real estate, commercial development and government