

Theater district development breaks ground, to be completed in 2020



Mayor Robert Jackson speaks at a press conference on Dec. 10 announcing groundbreaking of the Seymour development on Bloomfield Avenue.

By Jaimie Julia Winters

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The promise is that the new mixed-use development next to the Wellmont Theater will help make Montclair an even bigger cultural destination than it already is and also create much-

needed parking relief for residents. Whether that will all come to pass is not yet known, but the 2.5-acre development along Bloomfield Avenue and Seymour Street did break ground on Monday morning and is set to be completed by the fall of 2020. After that, the real impact of the development will come into focus.

The \$135 million project will include two buildings, six and seven stories in height, and is being developed by the partnership of Ironstate Development Company and Brookfield Properties. It will feature residential units, retail and office space, an area for art, public parking and a pedestrian plaza. Part of the project's goal is to create an arts and entertainment district anchored by the Wellmont.

More specifically, the six-story building, northwest of South Willow Street, will feature 200 rental apartments, 28,000 square feet of street-level retail space, 224 parking spaces and 10,000 square feet of space available for rental by artists. In addition, a former portion of Seymour Street, next to the Wellmont, will be converted into a 12,000-square-foot public plaza with access to the retail stores and the theater's box office.

The plaza is designed to have outdoor seating and art installations, and the plan is for it to play host to open-air performances and other events.

The seven-story building will rise just southwest of the Wellmont and is to include 40,000 square feet of office space and 210 parking spaces.

The project also includes a five-story, 315-space municipal parking garage at the intersection of Glenridge Avenue and North Willow Street.

Both the seven-story building and parking garage could be completed by the end of 2019, said Dennis Giuliano, the Ironstate project manager for the development. He said the

entire development should then be finished before the following winter.

PARKING

The parking relief promised by this project can not come soon enough for area residents, who are lamenting the loss of two public parking lots – totaling 100 spots in a congested neighborhood – to make way for the new buildings. The South Willow Street parking lot closed in August, while the South Fullerton lot closed in early September.

It was back in January, almost a year ago, that the council approved an agreement allowing for the mixed-use project, but with the condition that the developers deliver a parking facility along with it to replace the loss of the two municipal lots.

The five-story parking deck that is now to be built as a result of that understanding is projected to cost from \$8 million to \$9 million. Once it is built, the deck will be owned by the town, which will keep the parking revenues. In exchange, the township turned over the 0.6-acre South Willow parking lot to the developers.

There could be some construction costs for the town in developing the parking garage, but it is being capped at \$1.2 million.

THEATER

David Barry, the chief executive officer of Ironstate, said the company's philosophy is to "build community through thoughtfully programmed public spaces and curated retail that "creates energy and life on the street.

"The Seymour project] offers modern design with intimate collective spaces in a walkable setting that fosters social

interaction and a real connection to the surroundings,” he added.

Mayor Robert Jackson talked about his aspirations for the project. Recalling that he went to the Wellmont in his younger days, when it was a movie theater, he said the Wellmont was now turning into the Lincoln Center of Montclair and that the project would increasingly “put Montclair on the map.”

Montclair already brings art lovers to town with not only the Wellmont, but also Outpost in the Burbs, the Montclair Art Museum, the ever-growing Montclair Film and its festival and The Clairidge movie theater.

At the heart of this project is, of course, the Wellmont, which was purchased by Pinnacle Companies in 2015. It opened in 1922 as a venue for vaudeville and stage plays, and began operating as a movie theater in 1929. In 2008, the theater underwent a major renovation and became the area’s largest live concert venue, with a capacity of 2,500 people, and it currently plays host to 100 Live Nation events each year. The theater now includes the Pharmacie restaurant.

The architectural design for the new project was developed by two architectural firms – Marchetto Higgins Stieve of Hoboken and Minno & Wasko of Newark. Dean Marchetto, the founder of the Hoboken firm, said the project “will respect the historic architecture and brickwork of the theater and the neighboring Kahn Building.” He also said the building facing the plaza will contain a glass tower that “will turn your eye into the plaza” and that there will be rooftop amenities in the residential building.

Essex County Executive Joseph N. DiVincenzo Jr., said he was enthused by the project, adding that “any time I see a hole in the ground, with steel coming out of it, I get excited,” he said.

Planning Board member Martin Schwartz gave the mayor credit as

the driving force behind the project and for allowing the board the time to make sure it “aesthetically represented Montclair.”

Watch the video below by Rick Gearhart