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Big redevelopment advances

\$59 million plan will remake West Allis, backers are hoping

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West Allis - The \$59 million redevelopment of the city's farmers market neighborhood advanced this month, with the selection of a developer and the announcement that Pressed Steel Tank Co. will vacate its century-old industrial complex to make way for it.

Heralded by the city as one of the most ambitious redevelopment efforts in the Milwaukee area, the project is part of more than \$100 million in new private investment intended to revive West Allis' aging, industrial east side into a thriving community of homes and businesses on a par with Milwaukee's Third Ward or Bay View neighborhoods.

"The image of West Allis is changing. We're not the industrial dinosaur anymore," said Economic Development Director John Stibal, pointing to the arrival and expansion of several high-tech and professional companies in recent years.

"The new West Allis is a clean, casual, livable community."

Perhaps. But remaking a 100-year-old city best known for its industrial heritage is more complex than erecting new buildings, say planners and architects.

"It is an interesting experiment," said Harvey Rabinowitz, professor of architecture and urban planning at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

"If it is done well, and the marketing is done right, there is some chance. But these things don't happen without risk."

It is a risk West Allis has to take, said Steve Schaer, city manager of planning and zoning. "We have a choice," he said. "We can either grow or die."

The Common Council on Tuesday approved the selection of Brookfield-based Toldt Development Inc. for the project, which covers a four-block area west of S. 65th St. between W. Greenfield Ave. and W. Mitchell St.

Toldt will pay the city \$1.8 million for the 17.2 acres, including the Pressed Steel property at 1445 S. 66th St.

The developer is proposing to build 626 apartments and condominiums, along with 47,400 square feet of retail and commercial space, in three phases over five years.

The first phase, valued at \$20.8 million, would include 218 apartments and condos, and a year-round fresh market building to complement the open-air market that has operated at the site since the 1930s.

Toldt's selection came a week after Pressed Steel Tank announced that it would vacate its 320,000-square-foot complex to make way for the project. About 40 properties in all have been acquired and

West Allis Redevelopment



Photo/[Rick Wood](#)

Cindy Chapman of East Troy has been selling flowers and vegetables at the West Allis Farmers Market with her family for more than 38 years. She used an old scale to weigh snap peas for a customer Thursday.



Photo/[Rick Wood](#)

Shelby Alcott of West Allis surveys herbs and vegetables at the market. The market and surrounding blocks are targeted in the redevelopment that is to help revive West Allis' industrial east side.

either have been or will be demolished for improvements in the farmers market and nearby Six Points neighborhoods.

Under the agreement, the city will pay Pressed Steel \$500,000, plus \$2.25 million in relocation costs and provide a \$750,000 loan.

Stibal said the city would pay about \$1 million for an environmental cleanup of the property and \$900,000 to demolish the complex. Construction on the Toldt project would begin in the spring, he said.

Developer Helmut Toldt, whose firm was selected from among several candidates, said he's not trying to reinvent West Allis, so much as play off of its strengths.

"I don't have a vision of West Allis becoming the chic east side or competing with an entertainment district like Pabst City," Toldt said.

"West Allis has its own character, its own industrial heritage. There is a straightforwardness in the people and the housing there, and I expect that to attract people in all age groups."

Among the other projects in the area, developer Richard Carlson is investing \$50 million to transform the former Allis-Chalmers factory complex at 6737 W. Washington Ave. into what could be 650,000 square feet of office space over the next seven years. About a quarter of that has been completed, with another 100,000 square feet expected this year, Stibal said.

The S. 70th St. corridor has seen the infusion of millions in new investment by such employers as Milwaukee Area Technical College and St. Mary's Gateway Health Clinic.

And the city's original Greenfield Ave. shopping district has been updated with more than \$1.3 million in street-scaping and facade improvements in the hopes of luring more upscale and stable retailers.

To spur private investment, the city has established five tax-incremental financing districts to borrow at least \$22 million for improvements in the area. Most of that has been slated to acquire, demolish and clean up properties, Schaer said. In such a district, all taxes generated by the increased value of the property go first to pay off the debt.

Rabinowitz called the project a major development for West Allis.

"If they do it right, I think it can make a difference," he said. "On the other hand, new projects have fairly high rents . . . and the older part (of West Allis) is a little lower income."

Rabinowitz said he gets a "sense of vision" when he talks to Mayor Jeannette Bell and others in the community.

"The south side has a number of blue-collar suburbs," he said, "but this is the one making real efforts to change."

Quotable

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West Allis' manager
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The Project

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■ The developer wants to build 626 apartments and condominiums, along with 47,400 square feet of retail and commercial space, in three phases over five years.

■ A year-round fresh market building is planned to complement the open-air market that has operated at the site since the 1930s.

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