

Moving Dirt...Making History



Six East Peoria mayors - past & present

EAST PEORIA, IL – One U.S. senator, one U.S. representative, one state senator, two state representatives, six mayors of the same city, a crowd of 200, a high school marching band – and 105-year-old Grandpa John.

This was no typical ground breaking.

For that matter, no ground was broken to christen East Peoria/Downtown 2010, the urban redevelopment project of size and intent rivaling any in the nation. Truckers a quarter-mile away didn't pause their steady deliveries of tons of dirt to the vast project site. A few of the event's guests climbed into bulldozers to spread large mounds piled nearby for staged photographs.

The event, scheduled as a prelude to the Labor Day weekend, was the kind mainstream media usually don't cover and prominent public officials usually don't attend. Yet

they all came to this one.

Before U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin arrived, in fact, the gathering had already made history on the site that is central both to East Peoria's past and future. For good measure, the dirt they stood on is historic.

It's coming, all 200,000 tons of it, from piles left since the late 1800s when nearby river bluffs were mined for the coal that fueled the city's first economic engine. It's being spread and compacted atop the pulverized concrete floors that until 1997 held the first manufacturing plants of Caterpillar Inc., the Peoria area's 20th century economic engine.

There the dirt will serve as the base for, together, the city's

expanded downtown of dense New Urbanism design, a new regional economic engine and a mammoth transformation of industrial brown-field for 21st century use.

East Peoria/Downtown 2010 will be home to up to 5,000 permanent office and retail jobs, civic buildings, small shops, cafes, public grounds and several hundred permanent residents in live-work units and multi-story apartments. Private investment of \$130 million will fuel its growth.

But it was the \$26 million investment this summer from the first capital projects bill the state has approved this decade that prompted the pre-Labor Day gathering. With it, construction will begin this fall on two new streets and other infrastructure through the main section of the project's 100-plus-acre grounds.

After a decade of investing heavily in time and money, of state promises unfulfilled, of wrenching economic twists, slow progress and cautious hope, it was time not to merely break ground.



Senator Dave Koehler & Congressman Aaron Schock listen to US Senator Dick Durbin

East Peoria wanted to say, “Thank you” to everyone who believed in the project, kept it alive and played a crucial role in securing the state’s \$26 million investment.

Credit went to state Sen. Dave Koehler. Jeff Giebelhausen, president and COO of Cullinan Properties Ltd., the city’s master developer in the enterprise, called Koehler, D-Peoria, “the go-to player” who kept East Peoria’s interests prominent as the state capital bill was hammered out.

Jim Mamer, president of Morton Community Bank, received his due for keeping with his intent over six years to expand the bank into a new six-story office building on the site’s main intersection, which Cullinan will also occupy. Mamer said two reasons made that decision a no-brainer.

East Peoria over the last 30 years has built a reputation for using tax-increment financing and other strategies based on public/private partnerships to rebuild and grow a post-industrial economic base. Mamer congratulated

the city’s leaders for their tenacity over that period, among them Mayor Dave Mingus and his five predecessors, who by their presence added another first-time touch of history to the event.

One of those predecessors is Cullinan’s Giebelhausen. Firing off a list of other successful Cullinan-affiliated projects in the Peoria area, including the Shoppes at Grand Prairie, Mamer said, “They do things right.”

Accolades continued. Durbin, D-Ill., said East Peoria/Downtown 2010 comes “at just the right moment” to both prod and benefit from Illinois’ and the nation’s rebounding

economy. U.S. Rep. Aaron Schock, R-Ill., praised the “leadership and collaboration” among local and state officials over years to move the project forward.

City Attorney Dennis Triggs, who for more than two decades has steadily guided the city and its projects over waves of legal waters, was hailed – and ordered in humor to drive one of the dirt-pushing bulldozers.

As past met future on the old factory site, however, one guest took applause from all.

John Geier sat erect and alert next to his granddaughter in a golf cart near the stage, wearing a ball cap emblazoned with the designation, “Caterpillar VIP.” He began his 40-year factory life on the same ground and retired from it 40 years later – in 1968.

Geier is the oldest living Caterpillar retiree. “In our family,” Giebelhausen said, acknowledging his wife Lori in the cart, “he’s Grandpa John.”



John Geier & his daughter Alice Giacoletti