

Developer breaks ground on Norfolk's new Waterside District

By Tim Eberly
The Virginian-Pilot
© August 27, 2015

NORFOLK

This groundbreaking had more than shovels and a pile of dirt.

It's the waterfront, after all.

Tugboats sprayed water high into the air and blasted their horns. A vessel dropped an enormous yellow anchor into the Elizabeth River with an equally large splash.

Wednesday's ceremonial groundbreaking for the renovation of the downtown Waterside facility bore similarities to the groundbreaking for the city landmark more than three decades ago, city officials said.

In a speech to more than 100 people, Mayor Paul Fraim said the old Waterside served the city well for 30 years. But it's time for the new Waterside - called Waterside District - which Fraim said is slated to open in spring 2017.

"Now she must reinvent herself," Fraim told the crowd.

He said Waterside, which opened in 1983, was a "pioneering development" that redefined Norfolk's image and blazed a trail for development.

"It is no exaggeration to say that Waterside is the parent for the downtown that we enjoy today," he said.

Unfortunately, Waterside struggled to coexist with some of its offspring. It languished after the opening of MacArthur Center and the rise of the restaurant scene on the Granby Street corridor.

The Cordish Cos., a Baltimore-based development group, has signed on to revitalize Waterside.

David Cordish, the group's chairman, also addressed the crowd. He said he was honored to be a part of restoring Waterside "to its past glory."

Cordish said the real contribution of the renovated dining, entertainment and retail marketplace will be the economic "spinoff" that occurs around it.

"That will happen here," he said. "I pledge it. I guarantee it.... Our projects work. But the most important thing about them is what it will spawn around us."

Cordish said Waterside will have roughly 15 restaurant, retail and entertainment venues.

The anchor tenant, he announced, will be a 30,000-square-foot venue named "The Marketplace," which will include a craft brewery and a live-performance stage and will offer sushi and raw seafood. He said the Waterside District will have a rooftop deck.

"And the whole project will become a living room for the city," he said.

After the groundbreaking, Cordish said tenants other than The Marketplace have signed up to occupy space.

"But we're not going to tell you," Cordish said. "We're going to roll them out one by one."

City and elected officials peppered the audience, including City Manager Marcus Jones, Sheriff Bob McCabe, Treasurer Anthony Burfoot and state Sen. Kenny Alexander.

And there were some regular folks like Kay Ainsworth, 75, of Williamsburg.

Ainsworth said she was invited by an official from Festevents, which does event marketing for the city. She and her late husband spent many a day and night docking their 43-foot boat at Waterside to enjoy the food and other offerings inside.

"It was such a lively, wonderful spot," she said. "And then it just has kind of gone downhill. I'm just thrilled they're going to fix it up again."

She said her husband, who died nearly a year ago, would have been "thrilled" to see the waterfront marketplace reborn.

"We were so sad to see it go down," she said.

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