

Virginia Business Magazine

Turning Basin Project Could be Turning Point for Canal Walk

by Brett Lieberman

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Project: 111 Virginia St., Richmond

Owner: The CathFord Group, Richmond

Architect: SMBW Architects, Richmond

General Contractor: DPR Construction, Inc., Glen Allen

Broker: Edward P. Roberts, Advantis Commercial Real Estate, Richmond

Like many of the structures in Richmond, the Turning Basin has a rich history. It was a spot where mule-drawn barges could be turned around to traverse the Kanawha Canal system that George Washington envisioned would link the Atlantic Ocean to the Ohio River. Adjacent to the basin is a namesake building that likewise has historical significance - a once abandoned red brick warehouse owned by Norfolk & Southern Railway.

Today, that building is anchoring a \$17 million project that should pump new life into the city's Canal Walk and could speed the \$450 million Richmond riverfront development at Shockoe Slip. The building's owner, Bob Englander of the CathFord Group, likens the site to "basically ground zero for the canal development" which eventually could attract dozens of restaurants, offices, shops and clubs to the canal area.

The renovated warehouse is linked by a two-story glass connector to a new, five-story, 82,000-square-foot building. Combined, the two structures offer 102,000 square feet of space - space that has already attracted new downtown tenants, including Morton's Steakhouse and First Market Bank, which located its headquarters there.

The site was especially challenging because of its size and location in the city's historic Shockoe Slip warehouse district. The .94-acre site and height restrictions limited the developers as well. A 15-foot variance allowed the new building to go beyond the 60-foot height limit. The project also would have been easier if the Norfolk & Southern building were torn down, but the developers, city officials and community leaders agreed on its historic value. The warehouse was restored and the new building designed to mesh with the area's old, brick, warehouse style.

Englander and city leaders envision new buildings with residential, retail, and office space on both sides of the canal. Plans are in the works to rekindle Washington's vision by opening the locks at the east end of the canal to offer access to marinas and the James River. "All of that's going to take 10 or 15 years ... It's going to be a slow process, but one that is well needed ... and will have a huge economic impact on the city," says Englander.

Key to economic development was the inclusion of minority investment. A group of local minorities make up one of eight partners in the Turning Basin Building. The developers and Richmond City Manager Calvin Jamison see minority involvement as critical to rejuvenating the city's downtown core and creating wealth. Jamison hopes to emulate this model at other projects along Canal Walk. With good planning, creative thinking and help from minority business people, the Turning Basin Building could be a true turning point for Richmond's ambitious Canal Walk plans.