

FREEPORT BREAKS GROUND ON MARINA PROJECT

The Facts : February 07, 2008

Freeport breaks ground on marina project

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The Facts

Published February 07, 2008

FREEPORT — Gathering in the open grassy lot downtown, more than a hundred people roared in applause as the ground of the Freeport Marina site was ceremonially broken Wednesday afternoon.

The marina has been under construction for months, but the last hurdle— two U.S. Army Corps of Engineers permits preventing boat slips from being built— were not granted until Jan. 28. Now nothing lies between the dreams of a city and the marina's completion.

"This is indeed a great day," City Councilman John Smith III said. "We are excited about the future and the economic boost the marina will give to this community."

Reiterating the oft-stated prophecy of former city manager Ron Bottoms, Smith said the train of Freeport's economic redevelopment has left the station. Smith and current City Manager Gary Beverly told those at the groundbreaking that Bottoms and former mayor Jim Phillips, among others, deserve the thanks for driving the project.

"On behalf of the Freeport Economic Development Corporation, I'd like to thank the citizens of Freeport for their continued dedication," said Smith, who also is the corporation's board president. "It took dedication, perseverance and patience to get to where we are here today."

The marina survived six years of political power struggles and court battles. Many opposed the city's attempted use of eminent domain to secure dockfront property for the marina. In the ensuing turmoil, Bottoms escaped a council vote to have him fired and Phillips was defeated in his bid to remain mayor by Larry McDonald, the champion of those angered by the use of eminent domain.

Far from the catering tables and chatting crowd, construction workers dangled from the steel framework which will become the marina's dry stack storage building. Rising into the skyline, two elevators will bring 324 boats to their spots within the building after it is completed.

Work on the wet slip docks will begin as soon as the development corporation can receive bids, said Lee Cameron, the corporation's CEO. The wet slip dock construction required the Corps permits, but the dry storage building and rebuilt levee wall did not.

The city chose to wait until the final permits arrived before having a formal groundbreaking ceremony.

Walker Royall, the Dallas-based developer who will lease the marina through his Sun Resorts Co., said he looked forward to the day when the marina is open for business.

"It was six years since I first came down here, and we've overcome a lot of obstacles along the way," Royall said. He then offered the crowd the phone number for reserving slips in the marina — and the crowd applauded.

"We'll be developing this whole site we're standing on today," said Royall, standing at the foot of City Hall.

Retired dentist Dr. Jack Taylor, a Freeport resident since 1946, was curious about the groundbreaking and came to see the shovels driven into dirt.

"Anything is better than what we've got now," Taylor said. "I thought I wouldn't live to see it finally happen."

After the groundbreaking, developers and real estate brokers from as far away as Washington state mingled in the crowd, chatting with city leaders about the future. Houston real estate broker Barry Powell said he sees great potential in the downtown area as he talked business with Smith.

"I am certain you will find success in your endeavors now," Smith replied.

Smith said that before the Corps granted the permits, property owners were lying in wait.

"People have been holding their cards close to their chest," he said. "Now, they're showing up and ready to make deals."

Royall said the Freeport Marina construction is in the first phase. For the second phase of construction, waterfront dock space will be built along the Old Brazos River to the guillotine flood gate, extending away from downtown instead of toward Western Seafood Co.'s docks, he said.

Royall plans to fill the open land between City Hall and the marina site with a hotel, restaurants and retail stores once the marina slips and dry storage slots are filled with paying boaters.

"Once we get the marina full of customers, then we can support additional commercial, retail and restaurants," he said.

Beverly said he was delighted many more than expected came to the groundbreaking.

"I think half the people came here just to see if it's really true," Beverly said. "We've been working toward this day for a long time. It's a great day."

Hunter Sauls covers Freeport for The Facts. Contact him at (979) 237-0153.
