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Brothers plan a Ferris wheel on the Landing



Artist's rendering

By Matthew Hathaway
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH
10/12/2008

ST. LOUIS — When the bad economy handed lemons to John and Mark Rodgers, killing plans for their 10-story luxury condo development, the twin brothers turned to thoughts of lemonade. Or, less figuratively, a plan to erect a 175-foot tall Ferris wheel amid the 19th-century warehouses on Laclede's Landing.

"The only bad thing about it is, well, it wasn't my idea," said John Rodgers.

A friend proposed it to him over dinner after plans for the Rodgers' \$25 million Port St. Louis development fell apart. Talk had turned to what the brothers should do with their half-acre riverfront property just south of the Martin Luther King Bridge.

"He said, 'I'd put up a Ferris wheel,' and I thought he was joking," Rodgers recalled. "But, really, this is the most perfect spot for one."

Technically speaking, the brothers prefer to call it an "observation wheel" or, better yet, a



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"sky wheel." In other words, it wouldn't be your typical carnival-ride amusement.

Passengers would ride for about 12 to 15 minutes in 42 gondolas, each with seating for six and outfitted with a video screen. From inside the heated and air-conditioned chambers, riders would enjoy sweeping views of downtown and deep into the Metro East.



And the wheel itself — brightly illuminated at night in multicolored, LED lighting — would drastically alter the city's skyline.

The Rodgers are still putting together financing for the project, but they say the credit crisis won't torpedo the Ferris wheel as the housing bust killed Port St. Louis. They also have the support of some key city leaders.

None of this was part of the Rodgers' original plan. The brothers, 56, graduates of CBC and St. Louis University, made a name for themselves building and renovating houses, most of them in west St. Louis County, Clayton and University City. Their company, Rodgers Group, based in Clayton, developed Shaw Park Villas, a 12-unit luxury condominium project in Clayton.

In 2005, when they announced plans for Port St. Louis, city boosters and officials praised the 10-story development as the first new, residential high-rise downtown since the Mansion House opened in 1966. Although there was a lot of early interest from buyers, it fizzled after the real estate market went south.

Now, the brothers wonder whether the collapse of Port St. Louis was a blessing in disguise.

They think the wheel will be one of the top tourist attractions in the region, benefiting from the Landing's restaurants, bars and casinos. But just as important, they say, will be hosting corporate events and drawing families and school groups to the entertainment district during the day.

"If you're not gambling, eating or drinking, there's not much to do in Laclede's Landing," Mark Rodgers said. "This will change that."

John Clark, the president of the Laclede's Landing Redevelopment Corp., said he was initially hesitant to support the Ferris wheel.

"The knee jerk reaction was, 'Whoa, where did that come from?' It's a pretty far stretch to go from high-end condominiums to an observation wheel," he said. "But, when you start thinking about it, it makes sense."

Locals might take the Mississippi River for granted, Clark said, but seeing it often is a top priority for tourists. The wheel would be a perfect destination for those visitors, he said. The cost of tickets hasn't been determined.

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The redevelopment group has endorsed the project, and it isn't alone. According to Mayor Francis Slay, who wrote about the wheel on his blog last month, the project also has the support of Pinnacle Entertainment, St. Louis Convention and Visitors Commission Director Kitty Ratcliffe, and Alderman Phyllis Young, who represents the Landing.

HIGH HOPES

At 175 feet, the wheel would tower above most nearby buildings, but it still would be dwarfed by the 630-foot Arch and downtown office buildings.

The permanently installed Ferris wheel would be taller than the 120-foot tall temporary one that was set up in Forest Park in the summer of 2004. But it wouldn't come close to super wheels being built abroad, such as the London Eye (440 feet) or the Singapore Flyer (541 feet).

Mark Rodgers said the wheel's manufacturer, Chance Morgan Inc. of Wichita, Kan., is an investor in the local project. Rodgers said Chance Morgan officials met this month with bankers in Europe who confirmed an interest in the St. Louis wheel.

Including site improvements, such as new sidewalks and lighting, the project is expected to run between \$10 million and \$12 million. The Rodgers want the Ferris wheel to qualify for tax-increment financing, or TIF, but it's too early to tell how big that subsidy could be.

Slay's blog last month called the Ferris wheel idea "probably the most interesting TIF proposal the city has ever received, and we are looking forward to working through the challenges presented."

There's a public hearing next month on using TIF. And if all goes well, the brothers say, the wheel could be rotating by this time next year.

mhathaway@post-dispatch.com

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(6) Comments



Melanie Perry October 11, 2008 7:57AM CST

The London Eye was the first thing I thought of when I saw the lead-in for this article, so I'm not surprised it was mentioned.

Most folks who go to London, ride the Eye to get a view of the River Thames as well as all of the historic and modern buildings.

I'd love to see this project come to fruition and would definitely make it a part of any 'tour' I give to my out-of-town guests.



whoreallycares October 11, 2008 9:04AM CST

I would be shocked if this project actually gets off the ground (pun intended). If it actually does get built i'll be the first one on it.



Jim Allen October 11, 2008 10:01AM CST

What a great idea! Kudos to the Rodgers Group. Lemonade...Yes!!!



tombo October 11, 2008 4:43PM CST

This what downtown needs to bring **all age groups** to our downtown area. More people downtown means more jobs for St Louis. That's a winner.



soco October 11, 2008 4:47PM CST

The London eye is awesome...I just hope that from only 175 feet you can see a decent amount of downtown...it doesn't really compare to 440 feet. Too bad they can't make it bigger.

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