

Promenade fit for Detroit

Much of eastern RiverWalk to open Wednesday June 4, 2007

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BY JOHN GALLAGHER – DETROIT FREE PRESS

DETROIT - Welcome back to your riverfront.

The Detroit Riverfront Conservancy is to open major sections of the long-awaited RiverWalk Wednesday.

As an exclusive Free Press tour of the completed sections showed last week, Detroit's tired, abused, littered, abandoned and downright scary waterfront has been transformed into a clean, refreshing and attractive new playground.

"Now we've got a clean edge," Leonard Marszalek, chief operating officer for the conservancy, told me during last week's tour. "People aren't believing it yet. And it's like, 'OK, believe it.' "

Here's some of what you'll see:

. The conservancy's new RiverWalk Carousel begins operating about noon Wednesday at the foot of Rivard Street.

. Major new stretches of the RiverWalk include fountains, fishing piers, benches and separate paths for bicyclists and pedestrians.

. At the foot of Rivard, the largest of several planned RiverWalk pavilions opens. It will offer concessions, bike rentals and restrooms. It also will serve as operations center for the entire planned RiverWalk.

. East of the MacArthur Bridge to Belle Isle, in the existing Gabriel Richard Park, a smaller new pavilion will offer concessions and restrooms.

There's a new butterfly garden nearby.

. The simple, yet elegant design scheme includes inlaid brick and concrete patterns, some modeled after African kente cloth. Designers crafted the light poles, benches, tables, chairs and trash receptacles in burnished silver for uniformity and easy upkeep.

. A lot of the signage resembles a stylized wave pattern to evoke the waterfront location.

. Landscaping includes a mix of native grasses and perennial flowers.

. The first two pavilions, the larger one at Rivard and the smaller one at Gabriel Richard Park, include a signature tented canopy. The buildings are done in a silvery gray look, with accents of blue glazed black and orange overhead doors.

Wednesday will mark the RiverWalk's soft opening, with no fanfare. The celebratory grand opening ceremonies will come June 22 as part of the conservancy's first River Days events.

Good? You bet. And the RiverWalk is only about half done. The 2.6-mile stretch that opens this week at a cost of about \$25 million represents about 75% of the eastern RiverWalk, the part between Joe Louis Arena and Belle Isle.

About another mile remains to be done in that stretch, primarily at the old industrial Uniroyal site west of the MacArthur Bridge to Belle Isle, and where Michigan's Tri-Centennial State Park begins construction soon east of Rivard.

Over the next year or so, the conservancy will add two more of the tented pavilions on the eastern RiverWalk, and several features, including a donor's honor wall and various signs and other features not yet ready, will be completed.

Meanwhile, the conservancy has barely begun to plan, design and build the 2-mile stretch of the western riverfront, down to the Ambassador Bridge and beyond. That stretch won't be finished until about 2012 or later.

None of the new condominium projects that are scheduled to rise on the eastern riverfront has so much as broken ground. We may see groundbreaking soon on at least two of them, but there are a lot of blank spaces on the riverfront map to fill in.

So the riverfront remains a work in progress. It'll be years before we see the entire planned 5.5-mile RiverWalk completed. And it may take even longer for it to become fully a part of everyone's mental landscape of the city.

But thanks to a lot of hard work by the Riverfront Conservancy, its chief designer, JJR of Ann Arbor, and many, many others, Detroiters this week will receive an exceptional new waterfront promenade.

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