

Funding sought to turn Melanec's Wheelhouse site into riverfront park

By *Don Behm* of the Journal Sentinel

Posted: Sept. 27, 2009 9:28 p.m.



The final mystery to be played out at the former Melanec's Wheelhouse restaurant and dinner theater on the Milwaukee River: Who will contribute to its demolition and transformation to a public park?

The River Revitalization Foundation has offered to buy the boat-shaped building and 2.8 acres - with 650 feet of frontage on the west bank of the river - for \$1.4 million, foundation Executive Director Kimberly Gleffe said. The restaurant closed, and stopped hosting murder mysteries and other dinner-theater performances, in late 2005.

If the Milwaukee-based land trust can raise the money and close the deal by December, it intends to demolish the restaurant and remove two blacktop parking lots, Gleffe said.

A park there would provide public access to the west shore of the river north of downtown for fishing, canoeing, kayaking, wildlife watching, exploring and relaxing, Gleffe said.

The foundation is seeking a state stewardship fund grant that would pay up to 50% of the property's appraised value.

On Monday, the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District's commission will act on a proposal to buy a conservation easement to the property at an estimated cost of \$400,000. The easement would become a permanent deed restriction, prohibiting residential or commercial development.

District funds to pay for the easement would come from its Greenseams flood-management program, said Steve Jacquart, the district's intergovernmental coordinator. The Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission had targeted the property for protection in an environmental corridor study - a greenway connection plan - done for MMSD.

The land trust is seeking private donations to cover remaining costs of the purchase, said Christopher Jaekels, a Milwaukee attorney and chairman of the River Revitalization Foundation's board of directors. John Chwanec of Milwaukee is the current owner of the property at 2178 N. Riverboat Road.

The unnamed park would be linked to Caesar's and Riverside parks, the Urban Ecology Center and proposed Rotary Centennial Arboretum - all on the river's east shore - by an existing pedestrian bridge and the East Bank and Oak Leaf recreational trails, Gleffe said. The pedestrian bridge is located at the site of a former dam on the river.

The Beer Line recreational trail on the west shore would link the new park to Gordon Park at Locust St., she said. The foundation already owns a 4.5-acre riverfront property in that stretch, between Gordon Park and E. Wright St.

The Wheelhouse property also would become one of two southern entrances, along with Caesar's Park, to a proposed 800-acre Milwaukee River Central Park, extending along both sides of the river from the former North Avenue dam site north to Silver Spring Drive, said Ann Brummitt, director of the Milwaukee River Work Group. The group is advocating for a central park along the river corridor in Milwaukee, Shorewood and Glendale.

Re-creating a natural landscape at the former Wheelhouse property will include restoring wetlands, if feasible, along the river, planting native trees and shrubs and generally improving habitat for wildlife, Jaekels said.

A vegetation inventory identified evergreens and other plants from past landscaping along with native species, including a white pine on a hillside above the river. There

 [enlarge photo](#)



Gary Porter

The former Melanec's Wheelhouse restaurant, a nautical-theme eatery on the west bank of the Milwaukee River that was host to dinner-theater productions for decades, would be demolished to make way for a park under a proposal by the River Revitalization Foundation.

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are white elm, green ash, silver maple and cottonwood trees mixed with sumac, raspberry and choke cherry. Among the native flowers already here are evening primrose, violets, asters, goldenrods and cup plant.



After demolition is completed in 2010, "our next goal will be to open it to the public," Jaekels said.

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