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Canal Side environmental work near end

Business First of Buffalo - by [James Fink](#)

A laborious, but intensive environmental review of the proposed \$315 million Canal Side development is one vote away from becoming official.

But, as construction is poised to commence by late summer, the question remains whether the development firm charged with signing up tenants to fill more than 1 million square feet will complete their task by themselves. If not, some of the work may be farmed out to other developers.

The **Erie Canal Harbor Development Corp.**'s directors, Friday morning, unanimously approved motions to adopt the mandated state environmental reviews and Canal Side's general project plan — basically the development blueprint. The environmental review and general project plan now need only a formal approval and acceptance by the harbor development corporation's parent company, **Empire State Development Corp.**, before bids can hit the street. ESD's directors are due to review and vote on the dual items within the next week.

"This ends the process for you," said Adam Walters, a **Phillips Lytle** partner who shepherded the two key items for the harbor development agency.

The environmental reviews began in the summer of 2007 and included a myriad of public meetings and ample avenues for public comment.

"This spells the end of environmental mitigation that you've imposed on yourself," Walters said.

However, as the ECHDC begins to fine tune the first phase of the infrastructure bid work, which includes an underground parking ramp below Canal Side's anchor Bass Pro store, at least one group remains critical of the certain aspects of the project.

Canisius College professor Daniel Sack, vice president for the **Campaign for Greater Buffalo**, voiced concerns about the ECHDC having complete land-use control over the 21-acre site. Sack said he feels by taking Buffalo's planning and zoning requirements away from the city, it could open the door for less than architecturally pleasing designs.

"If you don't have zoning, you could have a McDonald's in the middle of a block or an office building where it doesn't belong," Sack said. "We have many problems with the design process."

Jordan Levy, ECHDC chairman, said his group has an on-going dialogue with the Campaign for Greater Buffalo as well as other groups including the Coalition for Economic Justice and Marine Drive residents. Those talks will continue and the project will be sensitive to downtown Buffalo, Levy added.

Levy also noted while Buffalo's **Benderson Development Co.** remain Canal Side's master development, as set in a three-year-old pact, if talks were to stall, the harbor development agency may look to other local firms to help land tenants for the project. Levy said chances of that happening, however, are slim.

Canal Side features more than 1 million square feet of retail, restaurant, hotel and entertainment space, including the anchor 130,000-square-foot Bass Pro store.

"We are laser-focused to work with Benderson. That is our intention," Levy said. "But, obviously, if it didn't work out, then, we'd have to look elsewhere."

Levy said now that the environmental review process is all but official, his agency can complete negotiations with both Benderson and Bass Pro. Levy said he spent more than one hour talking with Randy Benderson, Benderson Development president, Thursday night. He added the Florida-based development company's founder and chairman, Nathan Benderson is equally engaged by the project.

"There's a lot of interest from a lot of perspective tenants," Levy said. "It's amazing the amount of inbound tenants we've talked to."

Tom Dee, ECHDC president, said Bass Pro has invested more than \$1 million in pre-construction related efforts to their downtown Buffalo store. Formal negotiations are expected to be completed within the next few months.

"They're fully engaged," Dee said.

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