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Step forward for Canal Side

Business First of Buffalo - by James Fink

Calling it a milestone, the **Erie Canal Harbor Development Corp.** has cleared the path for a mandated environmental impact statement deemed critical to the Canal Side project to be reviewed and approved by its parent organization.

ECHDC directors, Friday morning, recommended the **Empire State Development Corp.** okay the Canal Side's final "Generic Environmental Impact Statement" when they meet on Jan. 21. Empire State Development Corp.'s anticipated approval allows for a planned March completion of the state Environmental Quality Review (SEQR) Act process and subsequent construction this summer on the \$313 million downtown Buffalo development.

Because of the complex nature of the Canal Side project, which includes the development of more than 1 million square feet of retail, hospitality, restaurant and entertainment in downtown's lower Main Street area, the environmental reviews — that include various stages of public comment — are mandated.

Canal Side's general project plan will be the subject of a Jan. 26 public hearing, set for Albright-Knox Art Gallery.

The final Generic Environmental Impact Statement was 944 pages long, including 736 comments from residents and those interested in the project.

The ECHDC panel was unanimous in its approval for the telephone book-thick report.

"This is another of those monumental steps in the project's history," said Jordan Levy, harbor development corporation chairman.

The report, many months in the making, "weighed and balanced all the issues," said Adam Walters, a Phillips Lytle LLP partner and the agency's lead attorney on the environmental review process.

Walters noted the project received more than 65 written or verbal supportive responses, an unusually high number in a typical environmental review process. Often times those who support a project remain part of a larger voiceless coalition.

"From a SEQR prospective, that's very high," Walters said. "That is a very good sign for the project."

Walters said a lot of comments were received from Marine Drive Apartments residents who have voiced concerns about a planned 1,200-spot, multi-level parking ramp. The harbor development corporation has been working with the residents to address their concerns.

“It appears many of the issues are not with the project, but other matters,” said Larry Quinn, harbor development corporation vice chairman. “Still, we’re trying to help them.”

Representatives from the ECHDC have held many meetings with the residents or their representatives, including one early Friday morning with officials from the **Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority**, which owns the complex.

Walters said the concerns have been identified and addressed in the environmental report.

“We are taking great pains to try and work with the tenants,” Levy said.

Canal Side, expected to open in late 2011, is expected to be anchored by a 130,000-square-foot Bass Pro store slated for the parcel where Memorial Auditorium once stood. Besides its commercial and retail developments, the project will include an aquarium, network of canals and other amenities.

The agency’s director learned four construction firms have made its short list to handle Canal Side’s build out. They are: **The Pike Co.**, **LeChase Construction Services LLC**, **LPCiminelli Co.**, and **Hunt Construction Group**. All have worked on a myriad of high profile area projects include HSBC Arena, where Hunt was the construction manager. LPCiminelli is the only one of the four short listed firms to be headquartered in Buffalo.

The four are expected to submit a bid later this spring and the harbor development corporation will select the winning bid soon thereafter.

“We’re happy to have all four on the list,” said Tom Dee, ECHDC president.