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# Is a reinvention on the horizon for Joliet?

By Bob Okon bokon@stmedianetwork.com March 10, 2012 9:16PM





Plainfield resident Brian Parpart (far left) shows waitresses his previous Halloween costume at Tilted Kilt Pub & Eatery in Joliet. The establishment, which opened Feb. 12, is located at the west end of Westfield Louis Joliet Mall. | Matthew Grotto-Sun-Ti

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JOLIET — Is Joliet “ready to reinvent itself”?

Mayor Thomas Giarrante used the phrase a few times in his Feb. 28 state-of-the-city speech, pointing to a string of examples that the local economy was stirring itself out of the doldrums of recent years.

Giarrante said later that his basic message was new business is coming to town, and, “The economy is getting better.”

But some projects will reshape the city if they move forward.

As if on cue, the Joliet City Council at its next meeting after Giarrante’s speech approved a land deal, spending nearly \$2.5 million to make room for the future downtown transportation center.

“It’s a big deal,” City Manager Thomas Thanas told the council last week before the vote, speaking of more than just the land transactions. The city project to build a hub that would bring all modes of public transportation into one central spot in Joliet is getting attention from urban planners elsewhere, he said.

“We’re hearing from a lot of people outside that they’re watching us and are impressed with what we’ve been able to do,” Thanas said.

The transportation center is a planned project, fueled in large part by a \$32 million state grant and designed to take advantage of future high-speed rail traffic coming through Joliet.

Elsewhere in the city, necessity is the mother of reinvention.

## Silver Cross campus

Silver Cross Hospital’s exit from its Joliet campus last month leaves a big spot on the East Side to fill. But projects will be under way there soon. Aunt Martha’s Youth Center begins construction of a 20,000-square-foot health center on the Silver Cross campus this month. The Department of Veterans Affairs will re-use the hospital emergency facility for a medical clinic, a project that was highly sought by veterans in Joliet and beyond.

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The city may get a bleaker assessment of the opportunities to transform the Old Joliet Prison into a major tourist attraction when planners working on that project give a report later this month.

Time is taking its toll on the old prison, said Pete Saunders with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. CMAP is working with the Urban Land Institute in trying to find new uses for both the prison and the old U.S. Steel mill nearby.

Noting that he's not an engineer with the expertise to evaluate building conditions, Saunders said of the prison: "It's pretty junky in there. The people in the Urban Land Institute who are doing this report are saying that there has to be some quick action taken or buildings will be lost."

### **Retail development**

Another project with a dubious future is the plan for Bridge Street Town Centre, a lifestyle mall at the crossroads of Interstates 55 and 80. That was the project that was supposed to change the image of Joliet, bringing upscale stores and restaurants and corporate offices into a mall that would become an attraction to shoppers, diners and workers from far beyond Will County. That was before the economy tanked. Now the prospective mall site still holds the houses that were bought and boarded up but never demolished when the plan was put on the shelf.

Giarrante pointed out that the project is not dead, and developer O&S Holdings still owns the land.

"I still think we may see it," he said, "but it won't be as big as originally planned."

Meanwhile, Giarrante can point to the existing mall — Westfield Louis Joliet, which is going gangbusters.

At a time when retailers still are trying to recover from the recession, the Westfield Louis Joliet mall is 95 percent full. And, the mall just welcomed Tilted Kilt Pub & Eatery, a trendy restaurant with provocatively dressed waitresses that opened in February.

Vinnie Gopalakrishnan, general manager at Tilted Kilt, said his first few weeks of business have been "fantastic. We've had a very warm reception in Joliet. People have been coming out in droves."

Gopalakrishnan has an interesting perspective of the Joliet market. Not only is it part of the Chicago metropolitan area and fourth largest city in Illinois, but, he said, "It's the last stop before you get to the corn fields."

That, he said, means Tilted Kilt has been getting customers from a wide geographical area.

Which also may be what keeps the mall full.

"We offer a compelling venue in which to do business," said mall General Manager Kate Knuth. Coming next to the mall is rue21, a fashion apparel store that opens later this month. And, the mall's occupancy rate may become even higher soon.

"We do have some potential retail coming to the center, which we will be announcing shortly," Knuth said.

### **Available land is scarce**

The area around the mall remains a big attraction, too, Giarrante said.

The city talks with retailers and restaurants interested in moving near the mall, but available space and developable land has become scarce, he said.

Car dealer Terry D'Arcy agrees that Joliet is getting attention.

"There are a lot of national retailers looking at our community again," D'Arcy said. "It is 140,000 strong. I've had calls about my property on Jefferson Street. Would I sell?"

But D'Arcy has been buying not selling.

He bought the Saturn dealership that closed when General Motors shut down the brand. And, he's expanding his Volkswagen brand by putting it in the new Jefferson Street location. The Volkswagen store opens later this month.

D'Arcy said he senses more confidence in consumers — at least those who are working.

"We can feel the steady forward momentum," he said. "I think people are more secure in the jobs they have."