

Momentum building for The Waterfront

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Construction is set to begin later this year on several buildings at Gramor Development's 32-acre waterfront redevelopment in Vancouver, Wash. (Courtesy of Gramor Development)

After years of infrastructure improvements, master planning and behind-the-scenes negotiations, Gramor Development's waterfront development in Vancouver, Wash., is open for business. Crews are due to begin construction of several buildings this fall and winter as the first phase begins in earnest, and Gramor, the driving force behind The Waterfront, announced Thursday an agreement to include a 120-room hotel.

Workers are grading and excavating portions of the massive site overlooking the Columbia River. Later this year, construction is set to begin on a 192-unit apartment building on Block 8, a 51-unit apartment building on Block 6 and a 70,000-square-foot office building with ground-floor retail space, also on Block 6.

The buildings are expected to be delivered in fall or winter 2017, and should open in early 2018. That's just the first phase of the 22-block development; the master plan calls for more than 3,000 residential units and 1 million square feet of office space.

The property, formerly a Boise Cascade paper mill, is expected to become a signature attraction for Vancouver and the Portland-metro area, offering rare south-facing waterfront property. Vancouver will fast become to Portland what Bellevue is to Seattle, Gramor Development President Barry Cain said.

"The final straw to get rid of the old era in downtown Vancouver was getting rid of this paper plant," he said. "It's gone now, and Vancouver's a waterfront city. It should be a very upscale, thriving downtown, and that's what it's going to be now. People have to get used to that now. That's where it's headed."

On Thursday, Columbia Waterfront LLC and Kirkland Development announced construction will start in spring 2017 on a 120-room Hotel Indigo, a boutique concept from InterContinental Hotels Group.

In the same building, Kirkland Development will integrate housing – apartments or condominiums – retail shops and a spa. The 130,000-square-foot structure will occupy all of Block 4. The hotel will be approximately 80,000 square feet, the residential units will take up 30,000 square feet and street-level restaurants and retail shops will take up 20,000 feet.

Construction on the mixed-use project is expected to begin in spring 2017 and finish in summer 2018.

A 7-acre parkway with a pedestrian walkway will swoop across the front of the south-facing development. Restaurants will have the most prime real estate closest to the waterfront on blocks 9 and 12. Taller multifamily towers will have river views from behind the restaurants.

Gramor Development's recent moves come more than a decade after Cain and Columbia Waterfront LLC first pursued purchasing the former paper mill property from Boise Cascade. The deal closed in 2008 for \$19 million. Cain's project partners include Vancouver-area residents Steve and Jan Oliva, Steve and Jo Marie Hansen, Al and Sandee Kirkwood, and George and Paula Diamond.

Gramor operates out of Tualatin, and Cain resides in Lake Oswego; he is the only partner in The Waterfront based in Oregon. He's no stranger to the Washington side of the river, however; Gramor has completed numerous projects in the Vancouver area, including Lacamas Crossing and Mill Plain Town Center.

The Waterfront is the largest project to date for Gramor, and it has simmered for years. After the property sold, a framework emerged from a master planning process in 2010. Then the city of Vancouver spearheaded a \$45 million project to upgrade a BNSF railroad trestle to enable access from the site to downtown's street grid. Prolonged negotiations on the project involved city officials, Gramor, BNSF, the Port of Vancouver USA, Washington State Department of Transportation's rail division and others.

Cain said the property is finally ready to go.

"You can go out there right now and you can start construction right away," he said. "Somebody can just do it now. That's a big difference."

Some tenants are already lined up.

Twigs Bistro and Martini Bar has signed on to lease 8,320 square feet in Block 12. It will be the 10th location for the Spokane, Wash.-based company, which also has a location at Bridgeport Village Mall. On Block 6, M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust has leased 18,000 square feet on the top two floors of the first office and retail building.

The park is being designed by PWL Partnership of Vancouver, British Columbia. Artistic water features and sculpture by Larry Kirkland will blend with lighting from Seattle artist Charles Stone and educational informational about the Columbia River's history.

"It's a pretty amazing piece of property from a recreational standpoint, not to mention units overlooking the water and restaurants," said Shana Alles, Gramor's director of leasing. "It could be somewhere you bring your family to play while you have a glass of wine or you learn something."

Development is taking a leap forward on the Vancouver waterfront.

In May, the Port of Vancouver named Vesta Hospitality the preferred hotel developer for the port's Terminal 1 property. Vesta, helmed by Rick Takach Jr., plans to build a 150-room AC Hotel by Marriott. Holland Partner Group was selected as the master developer for a Terminal 1 mixed-use complex.

Cain said he's confident that the Portland building boom has no end in sight, and will continue to expand into Vancouver.

"There's just a huge pent-up demand that's going to be addressed over the next 10, maybe 20 years in downtown Vancouver," he said.