

stltoday.com

Arch grounds update: It will get done

BY TIM O'NEIL • toneil@post-dispatch.com > 314-340-8132 | Posted: Wednesday, January 25, 2012 6:00 pm

ST. LOUIS • Leaders of the effort to reshape and expand the Gateway Arch riverfront park promised Thursday to achieve their goals but hedged on how much will be finished by their self-imposed deadline in 2015.

Walter Metcalfe Jr., leader of the CityArchRiver 2015 Foundation, said he was confident that key elements will be built by Oct. 28, 2015, the 50th anniversary of topping the Arch. Most visible among them would be a long-discussed pedestrian walkway over the Interstate 70 depressed lanes from downtown to the Arch grounds.

CityArchRiver has made the 50th anniversary its deadline since announcing a design competition in December 2009. At 6 p.m. today, Metcalfe and other project leaders updated their work in a public meeting at America's Center downtown.

In an interview before that session began, Metcalfe said he could not guarantee how much will be completed by the 50th anniversary.

"We will get this park connected to the city and the river by 2015," Metcalfe said. "What concerns me is - have we failed if this isn't all done with ribbons tied around it by 2015?"

No, he said, answering his own question. "This plan will be realized," Metcalfe said. "It will happen, especially on (the St. Louis) side of the river, in this time frame."

The CityArchRiver goal is to improve pedestrian connections between downtown and the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, redo the park's landscape to encourage more use and expand it onto the East St. Louis riverfront. In September 2010, a panel of judges selected Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates (MVVA), a landscape architect in New York, to design the specifics.

The MVVA plan includes the pedestrian lid over I-70 (officially a "park over highway"), new walkways from the Arch downhill to Leonor K. Sullivan Boulevard cobblestone river landing and a nature preserve on a new section of the national park on the East Side. With CityArchRiver's blessing, MVVA also plucked one of its competitor's marquee ideas - an aerial gondola ride over the river.

But Michael Van Valkenburgh, president of MVVA, warned last summer that the gondola couldn't be built by 2015. Metcalfe said Thursday that other Illinois-side improvements also won't be ready.

He said the project can meet deadline in East St. Louis with a widened, improved Front Street next to the Malcolm W. Martin Memorial Park and overlook. But he said complications in buying adjoining land and the need for a southward extension of Illinois Route 3 will delay other work on the east side of the river.

Metcalfe said the project already has money committed to build the pedestrian lid, reroute Memorial Drive and redo the intersection of Memorial and Washington Avenue at the entrance to the Eads Bridge. He said the Missouri Department of Transportation will do the street work and lid structure, which CityArchRiver will landscape. Those tasks will cost \$57 million.

Metcalfe said committed money includes \$22 million federal grants, \$25 million from the Missouri highway department and \$10 million in private donations to CityArchRiver. He said the foundation will continue raising private donations and seeking funding from government agencies.

Metcalfe said Thursday "planning refinements" have reduced the total sticker price to \$553 million, down \$25 million from the official estimate one year ago. He said that still covers all the essentials of MVVA's plan. The Metro East improvements would cost about \$180 million of that total.

Gullivar Shepard, an MVVA senior associate, said the refined plans still would remove Washington Avenue from Memorial to Sullivan Boulevard. Shepard said it includes new sloping pathways from the blufftop of the riverfront park down to Sullivan.

Other details of the sweeping plan would:

- Close Memorial Drive's northbound lanes from the Old Cathedral to Washington Avenue. Northbound motorists on the interstate will reach the park on the existing exit for Poplar Street or a new ramp onto Washington.
- Raise Sullivan by about 2.5 feet along the Arch grounds and Laclede's Landing to get it 4.5 feet over flood stage. Shepard said that will keep Sullivan dry during most of the floods that periodically rise above the cobblestone landing.
- Demolish the Arch garage and replace it with open land. Doing that, and removing Washington Avenue downhill along the Eads Bridge, is intended to open the park to Laclede's Landing.
- Build a new western entrance to the Arch underground museum that will connect to the pedestrian pathway. Tom Bradley, superintendent of the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, said discussion continued on what changes to make in an enlarged museum.
- Restore the two reflecting ponds with changes in rain runoff. The concrete rims will remain to honor the original landscape, Bradley said.
- Redo Kiener Plaza west of the Old Courthouse to resemble CityGarden, only without its trademark sculptures. Metcalfe said he believed Kiener could be finished by 2015.

Metcalfe noted that it still took years after completion of the Arch in 1965 to finish landscaping the park and building the grand staircase. Had CityArchRiver not saddled itself with the 2015 deadline, he said,

"We certainly wouldn't be as far as we are now."

Metcalfe's law partner, former U.S. Sen. John C. Danforth, sparked the current effort in 2007 with a call to create more attractions on the riverfront by buying some of the land from the National Park Service.

The agency stifled that idea quickly, but opened discussions for making some changes to the landscape.