Plan for the river could sail or sink

By Maria Matzer Rose

As Cincinnati makes another run at developing the riverfront between Paul Brown Stadium and Great American Ball Park, it faces problems that have confronted waterfront cities elsewhere:

Financing. Land acquisition. Decisions on the right mix of retail, residential and recreational venues. One-size-fits-all doesn't apply, says Michael Purzycki, executive director of the Riverfront Development Corp. of Delaware.

"We were looking for the Holy Grail, and there is none," he says. His city, Wilmington, developed the banks of the Christina River with walking paths, an exhibition hall and an outlet mall.

An Enquirer review of waterfront projects in Wilmington, Cleveland and Baltimore finds clear lessons for Cincinnati. County officials expect a deal by year's end on the Banks, a plan for developing 15 riverfront acres into condos, shops, restaurants and a hotel.

Foremost lesson: Waterfronts can't be islands. Development should blend with a city as a whole. The issue here is that Cincinnati's riverfront is cut off from downtown by Fort Washington Way. Similarly, an expressway blocks downtown Cleveland from the shores of Lake Erie, and railroad tracks are a barrier in Wilmington.

The review also finds that waterfront projects take decades, not years. The Banks might have happened years ago if Cincinnati and Hamilton County hadn't been in financial straits, and if raising the project out of the flood plain didn't increase the cost estimates astronomically. Cleveland and Wilmington also have been slammed by lack of funds.

By getting in the redevelopment game early, Baltimore was able to benefit from federal money that's no longer available.

Still, that city's popular Inner Harbor project was no overnight success. It has evolved since it opened in 1980-16 years after taxpayers approved construction bonds.

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In Forum

- Models and cautions: The keys to waterfront success. E1
- Baltimore: Inner Harbor took time. E4
- Cleveland: Rocks Hall not enough. E5
- Wilmington: Early plans fizzled. E5
- Issues to address: Five hurdles for Cincinnati riverfront. E5
- Your views: What city do you admire? E4

Online

- Go to Cincinnati. Corr for more photos of waterfront development in Baltimore, Cleveland and Wilmington, Del.
- Keyword: Photos

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VENTURING BEYOND the BANKS

Projects in other cities offer Cincinnati models — and cautions

By Marla Matzer Rose
Enquirer staff writer

Thirty years ago, Baltimore wasn’t high on many out-of-towners’ lists of places to spend a weekend. Its ethnic neighborhoods had a certain blue-collar charm, but its downtown had seen better days. All its department stores had closed, and the harbor abutting the central business district was dotted with vacant buildings.

Yet this year, a transformed Baltimore was named one of the world’s top 10 destinations by Frommer’s travel guides. The city last year was host to 11.8 million visitors, who spent an estimated $2.9 billion.

As officials negotiate final details of the long-contemplated Banks project on the Cincinnati riverfront, the experiences of Baltimore, Cleveland and Wilmington, Del., provide important lessons:

- Connecting waterfront development to the rest of the city is key to getting the greatest benefit for all. As successful as Baltimore’s Inner Harbor has been, many have complained that benefits have largely stayed at the waterfront — just as merchants along Newport’s Monmouth Street complain that they haven’t been helped by Newport on the Levee.

- Waterfront features can be hits in some places, and not in others. A riverfront outlet mall seemed like a good idea for Wilmington, but failed to live up to expectations. Experts in all three cities say developments should capitalize on attractions unique to a place.

- Redeveloping a waterfront takes decades — sometimes many decades. Hamilton County this year picked a master developer to kick-start the 15-acre Banks project, initially proposed nearly seven years ago. By comparison, it took Baltimore 16 years after voters approved construction bonds for the first major piece of the Inner Harbor to open in 1980. Baltimore has had 25 years since to build on that first success.

An urban waterfront is no ordinary piece of real estate.

“When you start talking waterfront, you get everyone’s attention, no matter where they live,” says Dick Rigby, co-director of the Washington, D.C.-based Waterfront Center, an authority on development issues.

Nearly every major U.S. city is located on a body of water — river, lake, gulf or ocean — and urban waterfronts have been transformed into places for recreation, dining and cosmopolitan living.

Yet for most of the nation’s history, waterfronts were gritty places of commerce and transportation where entertainment venues were associated with sweaty workmen and staggering drunks.

Walter Sondheim, 96, is a lifelong Baltimore resident and booster who acts as consultant to a business-led civic group, the Greater Baltimore Committee. He lives in a high-rise condominium with a sweeping view of the Inner Harbor he had a hand in developing.

But even Sondheim can’t give an eyewitness account of what Baltimore’s harbor was like in its shipping heyday in the 1920s. “My mother wouldn’t have let me go down there,” he says.

Early on, cities needed to move commerce to and from waterfront businesses. That resulted in train tracks and industrial corridors that cut the waterfront off from the rest of a city.

“There’s a lot of crying and wringing of hands that we gave the waterfront away to industry and railroads years ago,” says John Grabowski, an associate professor of applied history at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. “But communities have always looked at what the waterfront could best do for the city financially. That was the right decision at the time.”

See BANKS, Page E4
5 HURDLES THE BANKS MUST LEAP

Wilmington, Delaware

Starts and stops along the Christina

Cleveland, Ohio

Strong attractions, weak connections

Baltimore, Maryland

Looking elsewhere for ideas

Deal on Banks due before Dec. 7

Banks: Lessons and cautions