

# RIVERFRONT RENOVATION

PITTSBURGH'S STRIP DISTRICT HAS BEEN A POPULAR VISITOR DESTINATION FOR GENERATIONS, BUT NEIGHBORHOOD UPGRADES ARE LONG OVERDUE. RIVERFRONT IMPROVEMENTS AND NEW CONSTRUCTION ARE MOVING FORWARD AS ARE EFFORTS TO PRESERVE THE VITALITY OF THE STRIP'S UNIQUE SPECIALTY SHOPS AND VENUES.

BY JEFFERY FRASER



Nearly two decades after the defunct factories, mills and warehouses that crowded the banks of Pittsburgh's three rivers began to give way to bike trails, parks and retail, the liberation of the city's riverfronts from their industrial past has reached the Strip District.

New residential and commercial construction is underway that advances a vision of a public and sustainable riverfront, shared by the city, community groups and private developers, and evolved more from persuasion than regulation.

Plans include a riverfront park, which would stretch more than 20 blocks along the Allegheny River and would be the latest piece of the continuous 13-mile network of waterfront parks along the Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio rivers. The park was conceived by Riverlife, a public-private nonprofit created in 1999 to develop a vision and master plan for reimagining the post-industrial riverfront of Pittsburgh. Additional office, retail and residential space also has been proposed, which would incorporate redevelopment of an iconic wholesale produce terminal.

A particular challenge in the Strip District is maintaining the eclectic mix of shops, eateries and entertainment venues that have been central to the community's appeal while upgrading the patchwork of privately owned parcels that are ripe for development. Any change requires convincing disparate property owners to support a vision of how redevelopment will unfold.

"It's a very different way of thinking of what the city will be like along the riverfront that reflects the changes in our economy, the way people want to live and where they want to live," said Vivien Li, president and CEO of Riverlife. "We shared these ideas with the property owners and they bought into the concept. They were able to think beyond today and imagine the future and the possibilities it holds."

The envisioned riverfront park, for example, would add about 15 acres of new open space, attracting more cyclists and other visitors. It is expected to generate anywhere from \$6.8 million to \$15.6 million in tax revenue for the city, which would more than offset the estimated \$3.3 million in annual loan payments for the city to finance the work, according to a 2015 economic analysis done by Sasaki Associates, a Massachusetts-based architecture and planning firm.

The blueprint for the park also includes environmental strategies, such as flood plain meadows and other green infrastructure to collect, calm and cleanse storm water before it enters municipal sewer systems. It is an issue particularly important in the Pittsburgh area, where inadequate combined storm and sewage systems routinely overflow into the rivers in times of wet weather.

"When we are talking about rivers, we are not just talking about the waterfront. We are also talking about the water and air quality and the livability of the whole area because they are interrelated," said Philip Johnson, the Endowments' program director for Science and Environment. "We have a storm water and sewage issue. Our rivers are not as clean as they deserve to be."

Because an industrial zoning designation covers much of the Strip District, the city Planning Commission is considering temporary zoning controls that better reflect a shared vision for the riverfront. It is the first step in a plan to create a specific, permanent riverfront zoning district.

"The zoning designation that is on the books was set up to allow for and encourage rapid industrialization of the river's edge. That was a long time ago," said Rob Stephany, director of the Endowments' Community & Economic Development Program. "The reality today is that the riverfront is being recaptured as a public asset." **h**

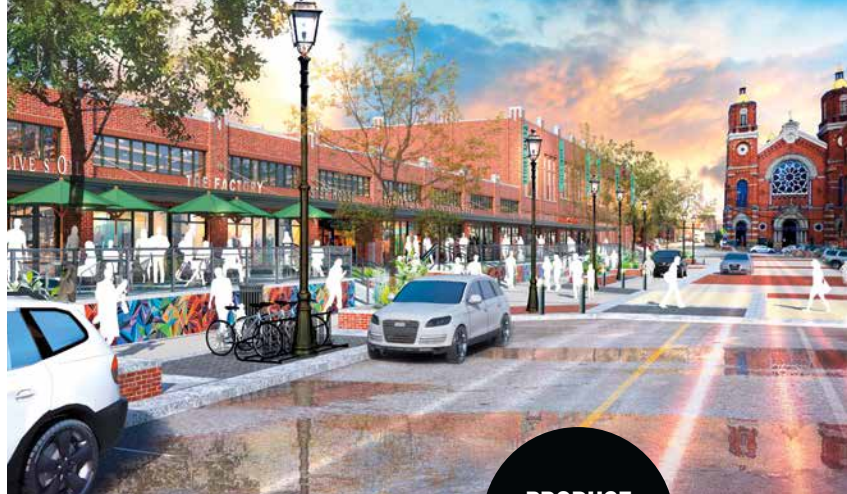
The Strip District produce terminal, which once had railroad yards with space for 660 cars, used to be the first stop for fresh fruits and vegetables arriving in Pittsburgh. Built in 1926, the 1,533-foot-long building is being renovated to include a mix of retail, offices and live-work apartments.



Late last year, a development partnership made public the broad strokes of a plan to transform the historic wholesale produce terminal into office space and mostly food-related retail. Proposals for the iconic building in the heart of the Strip District were discussed, and in April, the Pittsburgh Urban Redevelopment Authority hired Chicago developer McCaffery Interests to overhaul the 1,533-foot-long building.

McCaffery plans to renovate the structure to include a mix of retail, offices and live-work apartments. The authority will continue to own the building, leasing the property for as long as 99 years. Redevelopment of the produce terminal and related work is expected to cost \$70 million, with the developer investing about \$50 million into the project.

McCaffery Interests


**PRODUCE  
TERMINAL**

# 20 BLOCKS

Located on the edge of Pittsburgh's Downtown, the Strip District has long attracted visitors from across the city and region, even with its gritty remnants of an industrial past. For decades, people have flocked there to buy breakfast or fresh meats and produce on Saturday mornings or to listen or dance to live music on Saturday nights. And it's not unusual for visitors to spend hours walking through the wide variety of specialty shops that line the neighborhood streets. As shown here, sustainable development in the Strip District will have to balance modern environmental friendliness with historic community charm.

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## PLACES OLD AND NEW (WE KNOW AND LOVE)

### WHOLEY'S

Robert Wholey & Co., known locally as "Wholey's," traces its roots back more than 100 years to a shop in McKees Rocks, a borough west of Pittsburgh, that sold meats, sausages and live poultry. The owner's son, Robert C. Wholey, opened a market in the Strip District that became known for fresh and frozen seafood as well as meat and poultry. Robert Wholey & Co. also has an international division, which sells its trademark Wholey's Whiting Fillets and other products worldwide.

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### PRIMANTI'S

Known for its multi-layered sandwiches with french fries between the bread slices rather than on the side, Primanti Brothers started back in the 1930s as a food cart and then a small storefront that sold hearty, meal-like sandwiches to truckers and shift workers. While maintaining a presence in the neighborhood where it was founded, the restaurant today has locations across Pennsylvania and in other states, including West Virginia, Ohio, Maryland and Florida.

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### WIGLE WHISKEY

Similar to some other Strip District businesses, Wigle Whiskey distillery has a family-founding origin, but one that goes back only to 2011. In addition to selling craft spirits, Wigle Whiskey has become a popular venue for social gatherings, particularly among "millennials."



The most profound feature of the envisioned redevelopment of the Strip District is a riverfront park that extends more than 20 blocks and opens the Allegheny River to the public as a green boulevard with retail, housing, public art and outdoor gathering places. It also will lend vibrancy to the bike and walking trail that runs its length.

The vision for the Strip District riverfront park evolved from the Allegheny Riverfront Green Boulevard plan, which was the product of years of community-wide conversations on how to connect people and neighborhoods to the river in sustainable ways and leverage the economic potential of riverfront development.



Plans for the Oxford Development Company's 3 Crossings in the Strip sets the 11-acre office, market-price residential and retail development back some 95 feet from the river to accommodate the public riverfront park.

The hundreds of new apartments being built at 3 Crossings and the Buncher Company's Riverfront Landing development suggest confidence that the recent surge of people wanting to live in and around Downtown will continue, which would fuel demand for retail expansion.