

Trends & Analysis

Major Work Set to Start in Biomedical District



BIG BANG: The landscape surrounding the former Baptist Memorial Hospital on Union Avenue will dramatically change following the main tower's Nov. 6 implosion. -- *Photograph courtesy of Memphis Bioworks Foundation*

It will be hard to miss the next milestone in Memphis' emerging bioscience industry.

For anyone who's up at 6:30 a.m. Nov. 6 and enjoying free refreshments at any of the public tents set up near Baptist Memorial Hospital on Union Avenue, the early morning hours will be rattled by a cascade of steel and debris.

But the crowd of onlookers likely won't hang around for weeks and months to watch what follows the implosion of the former hospital's 960,000-square-foot main tower that day.

The tower demolition is the biggest implosion set to happen in the country this year, and the real work begins after the walls come down.

New development. The demolition will immediately make room for two construction projects worth \$80 million. The University of Tennessee is designing a new College of Pharmacy building that will go up on the site of a planned 1.4-million-square-foot research park in the area around the former hospital. UT also plans to construct a regional biocontainment laboratory on the site.

A panel of local business leaders is now working to get the most out of that building boom. The group of executives is finishing up a study of how to repackage the city's medical district, a project that could include a name change, logos and fresh signage.

"I feel like I'm in the last mile of training camp before the marathon," said Dr. Steven Bares, executive director and president of the Memphis Bioworks Foundation. "In other words, in a few weeks we take the building down, and then the work begins. That's really the bottom line."

Big event. That early-morning implosion will be a high-profile affair. Maryland-based Controlled Demolition Inc., hired to bring the main hospital tower down, has lent its know-how to Hollywood for 30 years and contributed to films such as "Enemy of the State" and "Lethal Weapon 3."

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Public viewing areas will be set up near the implosion site where donuts, coffee and hot chocolate will be served. The Memphis firm of Thompson & Berry Public Relations is coordinating implosion day events. And the razing of the tower will be, in a way, both a grand finale and an opening act.

"On Nov. 6, we'll clear the site between the University of Tennessee campus and Dudley Avenue, which we had wanted to do to get ready for that research park," Bares said. "We've basically allotted 13 months to finish the project. We expect it to be cleared up sometime in 2006, with grass growing, the building gone and the site prepared for the next phase of construction.

"And at the same time we're working on this demolition, we're also doing some work to get the site ready for that construction. If you drive down Union, for example, you'll see some work going on on that field in front of the tower. There's a sewer line that we're moving to get ahead of some of the construction. So there's just a lot going on."

10-year effort. The implosion represents a final hurdle the Bioworks Foundation must clear before it can shift into high gear. The 4-year-old nonprofit - whose board includes Jim Phillips, president and CEO of Luminetx Ventures, and J.R. Hyde III, founder of AutoZone - envisions a UT-Baptist Research Park that will take 10 years to build.

When it's finished, it will provide thousands of jobs and have an annual economic impact of \$2 billion - roughly the same amount of new development that's planned or under way in all of Downtown.

"As far as marketing, we've done a pretty comprehensive study of options with focus groups and things like that," Bares said. "And the stakeholders are about ready to come to a conclusion on that project."

Marketing the district. Beth Flanagan is spearheading the marketing effort for the Bioworks Foundation. Her Central Biomedical District Advisory Committee includes some heavy-hitters in the bioscience, transportation and development industries. The board met last week, and Flanagan said some changes could be in the works.

One example: "We are currently the 'Central Biomedical District,' but we hope to have a change of name soon," she said.

The advisory committee also has been working with Gregory Saville, a research professor and director of the Center for Advanced Public Safety Research at the University of New Haven, to look at changes that can be made in the Medical District.

Saville is a crime prevention consultant and veteran urban planner. A major focus of his work is crime prevention through environmental design, or CPTED, an idea that encourages certain environmental and landscape changes to reduce crime.

Major changes. What it all means for the area near Downtown that's roughly bounded by Watkins Street to the east, Linden Avenue to the south, Poplar Avenue to the north and Danny Thomas Boulevard to the west is that a new look and feel is on the way.

"That's really what I'm after, so that when you're driving down Union and you enter the Medical District, it looks and feels and behaves like a place where you want to get great patient care and there's some really high-end academic research going on," Bares said.