

Riverbend Growth: Local mayors talk economic development

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - Two local mayors discussed economic issues and took questions from the community Wednesday afternoon at the **I.B.E.W. Union Hall** in Alton.

Alton Mayor Brant Walker and **East Alton Mayor Joe Silkwood** were the speakers chosen by the **Riverbend Growth Association (RBGA)** for their quarterly **Riverbend Economic Issues** discussion. **RBGA Executive Director Monica Bristow** said she invites the mayors from all 10 Riverbend communities to attend.

"They'll share good news and things happening in their communities," she said.

Walker spoke highly of Alton's continuous economic growth as well as infrastructure improvements. Sewer work, business development, park improvements and the upcoming state-of-the-art high speed rail station were highlights of his presentation.

"Our downtown area is basically full," he said. "We have businesses filling up **Broadway** all the way to **Ridge Street**. That's right, I said Ridge Street. I never thought I would see over a hundred thousand dollars going to a building on Ridge Street."

That expansion is a theme throughout the city, Walker said. He said business expansion and economic upturns are thriving in areas from Downtown to **North Alton** to **Broadway** and **Homer Adams Parkway**. He said even the once-dwindling Alton Square Mall was undergoing a sort of resurgence through more than a million dollars in investments coming from businesses such as **Ross** and **Hibbett Sports**.

He was also excited about the upcoming updated train station, which may soon see the addition of structural steel. He said it may be completed in June or July of 2017. Once it is completed and the high-speed rail has been finished, a trip from Alton to **Chicago** may take as little as four hours. Walker said the station will "completely cut **St. Louis** out of the equation," saying the beginning and end of the loop will be Alton.

The new station will be completely modernized and will be over 9,000 square feet when completed. Walker said the additional 30 acres surrounding the station, which once was the **Robert P. Wadlow Municipal Golf Course**, may also be used for economic development. Walker said that development will also feature walking and bike paths. To preserve green space, the creek running through the property will be treated as a conservation easement with the addition of bioswales and indigenous plants.

Business retention was another badge of honor Walker gave Alton. He said the city was working with RBGA and **Alton Main Street** to check in with local businesses and help them with issues such as signage, storm damage and sewer issues. Walker said this initiative has helped retain as many as 130 businesses over the last three years.

"These retention visits have a huge impact on the business community," he said. "We're trying to do everything we can to foster businesses."

Sewer work throughout Alton, including on **State Street**, and soon to be on **Bluff Street** is currently being completed with the help of \$4 million in federal grants and county assistance. Walker said the barricades around the city were both good and bad things.

Parks around Alton are also a focal point of the city. Walker said the city secured a \$1 million grant for work on **Gordon Moore Park**, which he hopes will become a regional center for sports games and practices. He said the baseball fields were receiving more reliable lighting and better dugouts as well as wi-fi. The park's rose garden and Oriental gardens are also being improved, with the latter receiving more water effects, a gazebo and cherry trees.

A recent \$17,000 grant to **Riverview Park** from **Ameren Illinois** was another highlight of Walker's presentation. He said that money would be used to rewire all the lighting throughout the park, and move the meter from under the gazebo to a more accessible location. Walker said that relocation would allow easier work on the park's gazebo in the future.

"Basically, all the lighting in the park was failing," Walker said. "Luckily, Ameren stepped up and helped us out."

Saturday's all-day concert throughout Downtown Alton, **Rock the Hops**, donated all its profits to improve **Northside Park**, a donation for which Walker said he was extremely grateful.

"The people of Alton need to thank the **Mader family** for working so hard on that for us."

Liberty Bank Riverfront Amphitheater was also showcased by Walker, who discussed the growing success of shows such as the **Charlie Daniels Band** and **Feed the Need**, as well as free movie screenings being showcased there. He said last Friday's showing of "**Zootopia**" brought more than 200 people out to the amphitheater, despite looming bad weather.

"That's all only possible with all the help from our sponsors," Walker said. "I firmly believe all our investors have clearly made Alton a better place to live and invest in."

Walker said more than \$11 million in permits have been issued this year, which is the most in 20 years. He said other historic precedents have been overcome in the last three and a half years such as flooding, harsh winters and other unparalleled climate issues due to the city's strong sense of community and constant growth.





Silkwood described an **East Alton** in a different stage of the economic cycle. He spoke highly of improving the village's Route 3 corridor and the **Emerald Ridge** developments.

"Emerald Ridge is one of those few projects that actually turned out as good as the artist's rendition," Silkwood said.

The East Alton Silkwood described was preparing for an economic upturn. He said two of East Alton's business centers, **Eastgate Plaza** and the **Wilshire Village** were up for sale. The owner of Eastgate is from Los Angeles and the Wilshire's owner is based out of Tulsa. Silkwood said he would like to see those properties go into the hands of local owners, especially since the owners of Eastgate Plaza said they were not going to work on further developments on the property.

"There's 25 acres for sale for \$1.5 million," he said. "Over 20,000 cars pass by that property each day. We have TIFF set up for that business district. It's in an enterprise zone. The mayor and board are motivated to work with investors in our community. Someone's going to make money there."

Current businesses within the plaza, such as the AMC cinema, the Dollar General, **Julia's Banquet Center** and the village-owned ice arena will continue to be a part of that property.

One business leaving East Alton at 5 p.m. today after five years is the Walgreen's. Silkwood said that Walgreen's is one of two in Illinois and one of 200 in the United States closing. He described the closing as "not only a loss, but an opportunity for something new to come in."

TIFF money was not used to move the Walgreen's into that location, but Silkwood said it could be used to assist a future business moving into the more than 14,000 square foot building.

Another hot-button topic Silkwood addressed was the **Citizen's Building** in East Alton, located near Wilshire Village. He said the large glass building once surrounded by fountains in a moat could potentially be listed as a historic building. He said the **Illinois**

Historical Society flagged the building as potentially historical. A group from the **Landmarks Historical Society** are currently estimating the cost to restore the building. Silkwood said that figure may be released by the end of the month.

"We will go to the public with that number," he said. "After we get it, we may sell it to someone for a dollar, and I'll give them that dollar. If anyone wants the building, they can have it. If we can't find anyone interested in that building, we'll knock it down."

East Alton was given the building by the former owners. It has been vacant for eight years, and it is currently in a state of disrepair. Silkwood said neighborhood kids have broken several of the glass panes composing the building. As an East Alton native, Silkwood said he would be sad to see the building go, but added it may be an inevitability if no one wants to pay to refurbish it.

"The Citizen's Building has gotten a lot of Facebook likes, but those aren't pocketbook likes," he said.