

Steelyard Commons takes form

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Construction of Steelyard Commons -- the \$120 million, 1-million-square-foot open-air shopping center in Cleveland's Industrial Valley -- has reached the halfway mark.

Its developer, Lyndhurst-based First Interstate Properties Ltd., is still on track to open the shopping center's first phase, 650,000 square feet of retail space and four freestanding restaurants, by spring. An additional 250,000 square feet will be added after that.

"When you get into site work on 125 acres that were formerly part of a steel plant, there are going to be some physical challenges," said Mitchell Schneider, First Interstate's president. "But so far, there's been nothing insurmountable, nothing budget-breaking and nothing that's created a serious time delay."

Here's an update on the progress so far.

Excavation/infrastructure

Excavation work, grading of the site and installation of utilities is more than 90 percent complete. Schneider said there have been "very few environmental problems compared with most industrial land." First Interstate has been working with the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency through its voluntary action program to clean the site.

Other parts of the site preparation have been more challenging, said Richard Carlisle, vice president and director of development for First Interstate.

The site is littered with slag -- waste material separated from metal in the steel-making process.

Underground water runs through slag more quickly than soil, making it difficult to dig trenches, install utilities and perform other groundwork.

"At times, it's like trying to excavate in a lake," Carlisle said. "The water is moving so fast, you can't pump it out."

Other steps that have been completed include the installation of lights along Steelyard Drive, the main road through the site, and about 7,000 linear feet of curbs. First Interstate expects to complete the paving of the drive and parking lots by the end of August.

Roadwork

The Ohio Department of Transportation has started construction of the Quigley Road Connector, a new road into the Industrial Valley that will link Steelyard Commons to Interstate 71 and the Jennings Freeway.

Because of that work:

West 14th Street is closed to through traffic from Clark Avenue to the bridge over I-71, and will reopen in early August.

The Jennings northbound exit ramp to West 14th Street closed last month and will reopen about Aug. 4.

The I-71 northbound exit ramp to West 14th Street is slated to close on Monday and reopen on Aug. 4.

As of June 19, motorists will no longer be able to turn north from Valentine Avenue onto West 14th Street.

First Interstate has completed an embankment for the connector on the Steelyard Commons site.

Building construction

Foundation work on the site is a lengthy process, lasting from six to 10 weeks. Caissons, or large steel piles, have to be driven through the ground to provide stability to the buildings.

The foundation of the first building, a Target, is complete, and construction is starting to go vertical. Foundation work on the second building, a Home Depot, is almost complete.

Of the 650,000 square feet in the first phase, First Interstate has leased about 94 percent. "That's about where we thought we would be at this point," Schneider said.

Some of the other first-phase stores include Wal-Mart, Staples, Best Buy, Marshalls and Old Navy.

Steel heritage

In addition to the retail and restaurants, Steelyard Commons will be home to pieces of Cleveland's steel heritage. Moved to new locations last month were a 260-foot-long, 55-ton utility bridge that now spans Steelyard Drive and a railcar that used to transport hot molten iron across the mill. The railcar sits close to a 600-square-foot red brick building that once housed steel mill offices and will now have historical exhibits.

One more piece - a giant crane that was used in the mill - still needs to be moved.

Schneider said the exhibit building will sit alongside a small park that will have ticket booths for the Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad, which plans to extend its rail line into downtown Cleveland, and a comfort station for users of a proposed extension of the Towpath Trail.