
Ground broken for Centennial Plaza

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Posted Aug 27, 2019 at 7:01 PM

Updated Aug 27, 2019 at 7:12 PM

Downtown road closures to begin Wednesday.

CANTON Construction of the city's centerpiece officially has begun.

After years of adjustments to the plans and cost for Centennial Plaza, city and community leaders shoveled dirt at a ceremonial groundbreaking Tuesday.

"This is a new beginning," Mayor Thomas Bernabei said to roughly 200 people gathered on the grassy lot.

Construction fencing and road closure signs soon will surround the square west of Market Avenue N between Third and Fourth streets NW. The renovations are expected to cost \$12.3 million and be done before the city hosts the NFL Centennial Celebration in September 2020.

The mayor thanked local and state leaders and community organizations for their contributions — from the Canton Rotary Club's \$100,000 donation for design work in 2015 to Canton voters who approved a 0.5% income tax increase in 2018.

"First and foremost, thank you to the voters of the city of Canton," he said.

Issue 13 created the comprehensive plan fund, which collects 60% of the additional tax revenue and will cover \$7.3 to \$8.3 million of the project. The rest is expected to come from the state, which has allocated \$1.5 million, and private donations, which total about \$2.5 million.

Campaign leaders

Gervasi Vineyards owner Ted Swaldo led the campaign for private donors, who will be recognized on a wall in the plaza.

Swaldo was among the people Bernabei commended for “extraordinary leadership and commitment” during Centennial Plaza planning. The others were state Sen. Kirk Schuring, R-Jackson Township; Jim Porter, publisher of The Canton Repository; David Baker, president and CEO of the Pro Football Hall of Fame; and Denny Saunier, CEO of the Canton Regional Chamber of Commerce.

“My deepest gratitude to them for their unswerving commitment to the completion of the project and to Canton’s future,” Bernabei said.

Baker, who spoke after the mayor, compared the day’s gathering to the “huddle” of men who founded the National Football League in Canton nearly 100 years ago. Despite the many versions of the plaza’s design and challenges with funding, community leaders came together to make it possible.

“Today is the result of all that courage,” Baker said.

Frequently asked when Centennial Plaza will be done, Baker said he hopes it’s never finished. He wants the site to improve continually.

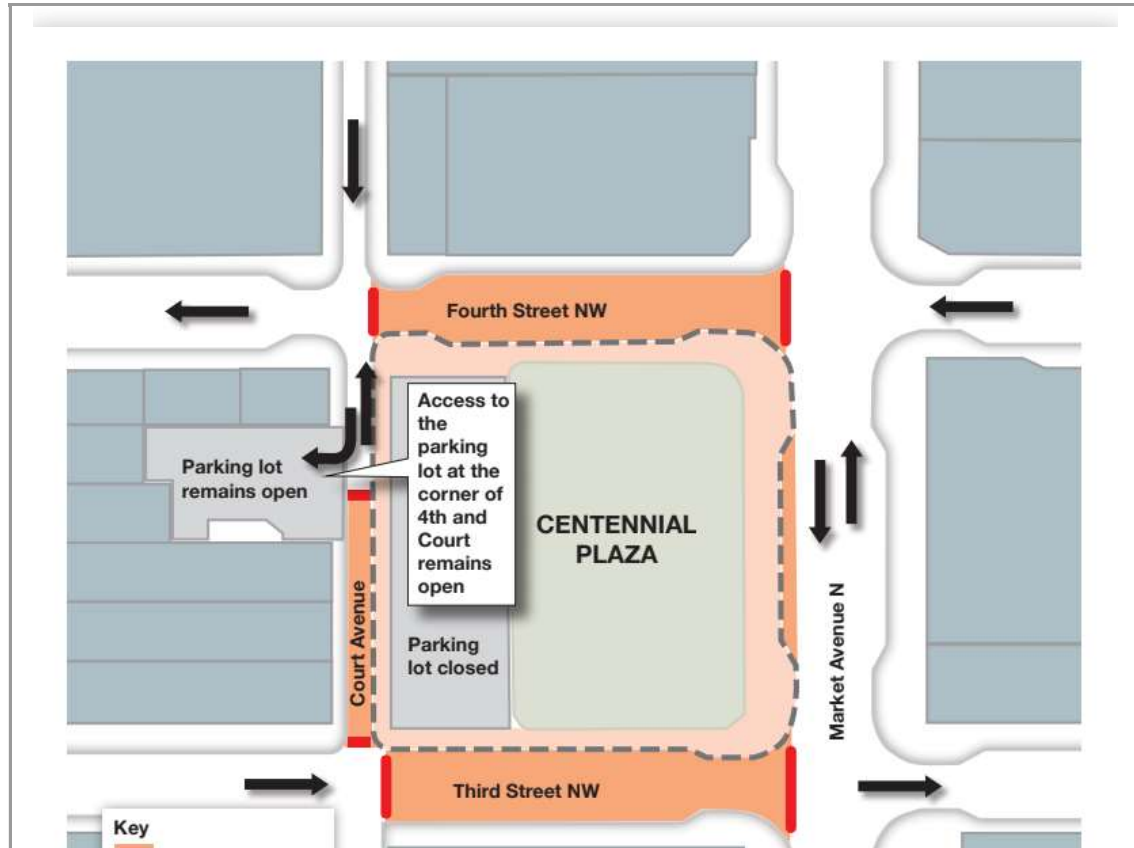
“This is just the beginning,” he said.

Several members of Canton City Council were present and recognized Tuesday. Council approved the final plans and name change, from Market Square to Centennial Plaza, earlier this year.

The design by MKSK, a Columbus-based firm, is a football-shaped green surrounded by trees and outdoor seating. There is a covered stage with a video board on the southwest end and four, 75-foot vertical arches on the northeast end. A café with an oculus, a circular opening in the roof that will project light, is planned for the northwest side.

Other plaza features include public restrooms, digital kiosks, a sound system, programmable lighting, fire pits and a “Canton” sculpture.

City Council also authorized the mayor to enter a 10-year agreement with the Pro Football Hall of Fame for programming, marketing and maintenance of the plaza — to be done at no cost and in partnership with city and community leaders.



Work ahead

During construction, traffic will be maintained on Market Avenue N. Planning Director Donn Angus said construction trailers from the general contractor, Dunlop & Johnston Inc., will fill the parking spaces on the west side of the street.

Third and Fourth streets between Court Avenue NW and Market Avenue will be closed to traffic for the duration of the project, he said. Pedestrian access will be maintained to businesses.

Court Avenue traffic will change directions, from northbound to southbound, between Fifth and Fourth and Third and Second streets. Angus said there will be vehicle access to the parking lot west of Court Avenue, but the street otherwise will be closed between Fourth and Third streets.

The parking lot to the east of Court Avenue will become part of Centennial Plaza.

“There will be no more parking there,” Angus said.

Work will commence on the southwest corner and end on the northeast. Angus said underground utility and foundation work will occur in the first few months and above-ground work won't occur until late winter or early spring.

In the coming weeks, ArtsinStark will move the metal gorilla, fish and duck sculptures from the square to the Canton Cultural Center for the Arts.

"They're going to have a new home to make way for this great project," said Robb Hankins, president and CEO of ArtsinStark.

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