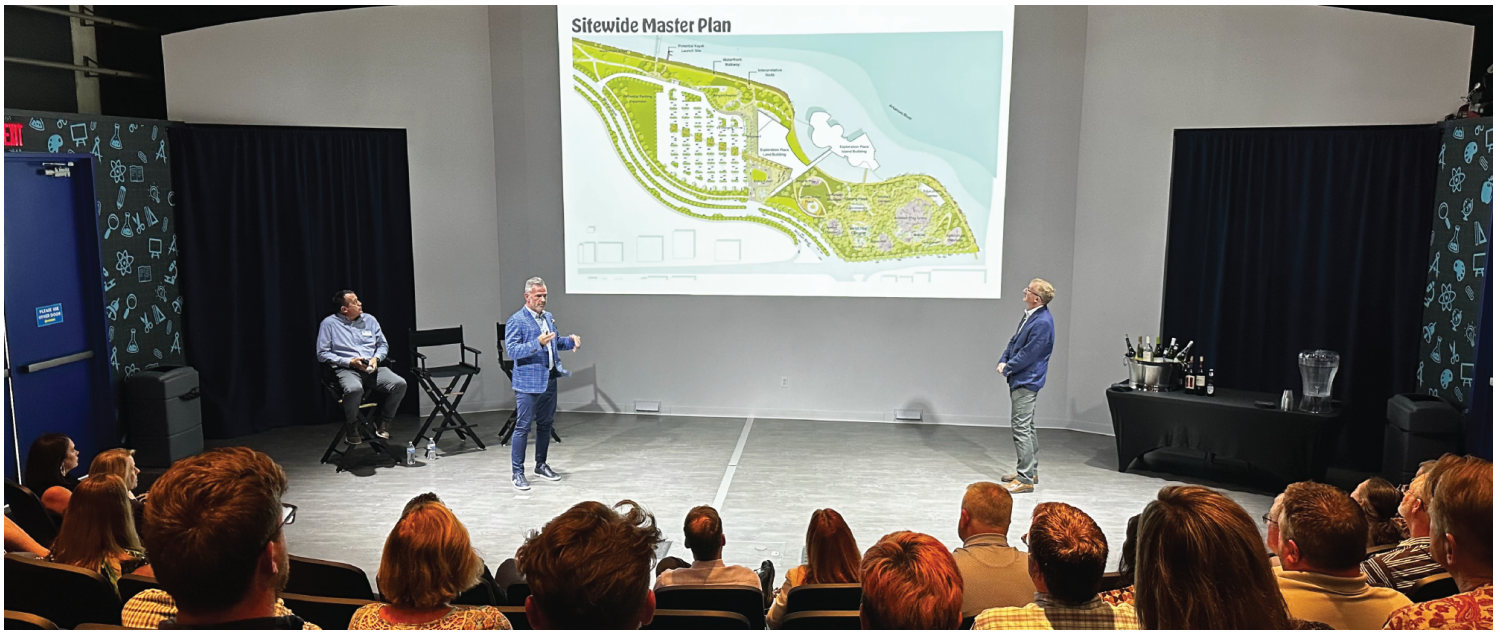

Revitalizing Wichita's Riverfront, Captivating Conversation with EP's Adam Smith

By Emily Younger Barnwell

Think big. Think bold. Above all, think aspirational. Soon, Wichita's west riverbank will be transformed into a destination oasis – a community gathering space capable of drawing 1 million visitors a year.

The transformational vision, dubbed the EP2 Initiative, is the brainchild of Exploration Place's (EP) year-long strategic planning effort; an effort that engaged nearly 60 community leaders and 5,000 residents.

"The goals are straightforward: enrich local life quality, boost tourism, and help employers attract and retain talent," said Exploration Place President Adam Smith.

Smith, who took the top spot at EP in 2019 and brings a wealth of museum experience spanning the United States and the United Kingdom, explained the benefits of the outdoor expansion are immediate and substantial.

"For every family in Wichita with kids, this project is already long overdue!" he said enthusiastically. "I also want to help fill the thousands of STEM-related jobs that are being created in our local economy."

Activating the River – A Key to Workforce Development

Smith said one of the strongest statements he hears from local employers is the difficulty they have attracting and retaining talent in Wichita.

"Projects like ours show investment in top quality amenities of the kind of city you'd be proud to show your friends and family."

The $22 million EP2 Initiative is expected to elevate Wichita's status as a regional tourism destination, acting as a catalyst for further economic development throughout the downtown river corridor.

A Bold Vision

The initial phase of the project includes a fully funded 1,500-capacity, open-air riverfront amphitheater. The versatile venue promises year-round outdoor programming and offers an ideal location for individuals to take in the nightly Keeper of the Plains fire pots experience and drone light shows.

The ambitious second phase includes an immersive, educational Destination Playscape. Spanning six acres, the age-progressive play environment boasts 10 structures featuring dynamic water play, a sensory garden, an aviation-themed attraction, The Great Bison and a specialized rope-based playground. It will also include the construction of a new education center, restrooms, and concessions.

"It will make Wichita and its river more appealing to residents, tourists and businesses. Increased footfall downtown creates a virtuous cycle, boosting the city's reputation," Smith explained.

One of the most important factors for the project – quality. Smith said it is non-negotiable.

"When I arrived in Wichita, I sensed a hesitancy to strive for 'big city' type projects. Almost to the extent of having an inferiority complex. I feel we should retain our pragmatism but not let it cap our aspirations. **Risk is inherent in progress**," he noted.

Progress in Motion

The EP2 Initiative has secured $14 million or 63 percent of its fundraising goal. Smith called it a collective effort.

"Just a heartfelt thank you to everyone who believes in the power of community collaboration. I am enormously grateful to the Partnership and Downtown Wichita for the support they have been giving to Exploration Place, and the belief they have shown in our vision," Smith added.

The first phase of the vision, the amphitheater, is expected to come to life in 2024 while Smith is targeting a 2025 opening date for the Destination Playscape. Smith estimates the initiative will increase the EP's overall economic impact from $21 million a year to $66.7 million by 2027.

"Our goal is to serve as a catalyst for other ambitious, high-quality projects in Wichita," he said.

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W 1st ST
Festival Water Plaza
Concessions
Education Center
Small Children's Grove
Sensory Garden
Dining Plaza
Sunflower Meadow
Prairie Play Node
Arkansas River
Exploration Place