

Stimulus spurs RI rebirth

Alma Gaul | Posted: Sunday, May 29, 2011 2:00 am

Inside the shell of what was warehouse and office space for the Illinois Oil Co. in Rock Island, 30 new apartments take shape.

Drywall is up, 66 new window openings have been cut into the north side to bring in light, and a one-story addition has been built on the south, including a three-story elevator, a community room and a porte-cochere, or covered driveway.

Known as Jackson Square, the project by the foot of the Rock Island Viaduct - 24th Street and 4th Avenue - should be finished in September, with occupancy shortly thereafter, said Paul Fessler, a construction director with the Rock Island Economic Growth Corp., a nonprofit community developer.

The \$8.2 million project is the single biggest Quad-City recipient of funds from the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, or federal "stimulus" bill, that is funneling a total of \$20.1 million into Rock Island, Moline and Davenport through the Neighborhood Stabilization Program.

Jackson Square will receive \$5.9 million in program money, with the remainder of the project costs coming from other sources.

The goal of the program is to stimulate the economy and stabilize neighborhoods by encouraging the purchase and redevelopment of blighted, abandoned and foreclosed properties.

And it "has done exactly what it intended," said Brian Hollenback, the president of Renaissance Rock Island, an umbrella organization for the growth corporation.

Davenport expects to receive \$1.5 million in program money. Among the prominent multifamily projects there will be help with the conversion of Jackson School, 1420 16th St., into 48 senior living apartments by Renaissance Companies of Chicago. The circa-1903 school has been vacant in recent years.

Moline expects to receive \$3.7 million. Among the prominent multifamily projects there will be the rehab of the Washington Square, a downtown building constructed in the late 1800s by John Deere's son, Charles, as an upscale, Italianate-style row house. Most recently vacant and boarded up, it will be made into 10 apartments.

Rock Island will receive a total of \$14.9 million that, in addition to funding Jackson Square, will pay for the purchase and rehab of foreclosed or abandoned single-family homes, demolition of blighted homes and construction of new homes on vacant land.

But the construction of apartments in the landmark Illinois Oil building is the highest-profile project, an adaptive reuse of a prominent building that otherwise might have sat vacant on land that had been contaminated by various chemicals used in the oil company's business.

The project is a big bright spot in an area that is seeing other improvements and developments.

The Mandus Group/Spirit Partners, which rehabbed and occupies a former warehouse directly south of the Illinois Oil building, is redeveloping another building on its block, the four-story former Rock Island Register Co.

Mandus/Spirit will tear down the former Jim's Rib Haven smokehouse and build parking lots with landscaping, including rows of trees, in the two greenspaces on either side of its headquarters.

"The whole complexion of the corner is going to change," said Sam Kupresin, the president of Mandus Group/Spirit Partners. The changes will give tenants of Jackson Square a more attractive view, he added.

Another project in the area will be the building of the long-planned Children's Garden at the Quad-City Botanical Center, although no date has been set for that work to get under way.

And the Jackson Square project has space for two businesses on the ground floor.