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PEOPLE TO WATCH

Directing development

Buchanan Ingersoll's Thomas VanKirk leads Cultural Trust's Downtown residential project

BY PATTY TASCARELLA

It's not every day that somebody gets the chance to play a key part in revitalizing Downtown Pittsburgh.

So, it's no wonder that Thomas VanKirk didn't hesitate to take the helm of the Eighth Street Development Project, the massive residential complex the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust is spearheading to reshape and revitalize the city's central district.

VanKirk, 60, CEO of Buchanan Ingersoll PC and a nine-year member of the Cultural Trust board, was asked by trust president Kevin McMahon and board chairman James Rohr, chairman and CEO of PNC Financial Services Group Inc., to chair the development project in September 2004.

And now the project is just months away from the selection of a design team. This week, five undisclosed national finalists came to Pittsburgh to meet with VanKirk and various trust committees. The group will be whittled down to two final candidates after the visit.

"We'd like to select the designer/developer by the end of June 2006," VanKirk said. From that point, it will take four to five years to complete the project, which is likely to include between 300 and 500 residential units.

VanKirk, who has been working Downtown since 1971 when he joined Buchanan, Pittsburgh's oldest and fourth-largest law firm, has witnessed a vibrant urban core lose momentum in the middle 1980s, as many corporations were acquired or downsized and business, entertainment and retail venues fled to the suburbs.

For years, Downtown hasn't had a strong residential presence, nor the infrastructure — such as grocery stores and other providers



Photo by Joe Wojcik

POINT MAN: Thomas VanKirk, a nine-year member of the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust board, is heading the organization's Eighth Street Development Project, a massive residential complex planned for land owned by the trust along Fort Duquesne Boulevard.

of everyday necessities — to support it.

"The development of retail property in Downtown Pittsburgh is the key to its survival, and I wanted to help to make this happen," VanKirk said.

'LOOK AT THE VIEWS'

VanKirk has been at the center of setting up a number of committees to help build consensus and figure out a direction for the trust's project.

Rohr, who likened the process to "herding cats," said VanKirk's patience and collaborative skills have kept everything on track throughout the planning stage, as committees meet to form a vision.

"They can go three ways — be very collaborative and end up with a satisfactory

■ PBT DOSSIER

Thomas VanKirk

CEO, Buchanan Ingersoll PC; chairman, Pittsburgh Cultural Trust's Eighth Street Development Project.

■ **Age:** 60

■ **Residence:** Mount Lebanon

■ **Family:** Wife, Bonnie; four grown children

■ **Education:** Bachelor's degree in political science, Bucknell University; juris doctorate degree, Dickinson School of Law

■ **Hobbies:** Golf, skiing and walking his dogs — Mulligan, Kelly and Lilly

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outcome, argumentative and wind up unsatisfactory, or they can just go on forever," Rohr said of the process. "Tom has the perfect personality to set up those kind of meetings and keep them moving."

What is certain is the major portion of the proposed project site sits on Cultural Trust-owned property along Fort Duquesne Boulevard and consists mostly of surface parking lots. In all, the trust owns the bulk of two city blocks in the area between Fort Duquesne Boulevard and Penn Avenue.

Two or three residential buildings likely will be built in phases and will incorporate the riverfront, linking Downtown bookends of the David L. Lawrence Convention Center and PNC's FirstSide Center and making the several block Cultural District a destination. It will include elements of green, such as pathways where dog owners can trot with their pets.

"All you have to do is walk along our rivers from the Heinz History Center to Washington's Landing, or the Hot Metal Bridge to Station Square, and look at the views," said Van Kirk, who hits those existing paths frequently with his wife, Bonnie, and their three Labrador retrievers, Mulligan, Kelly and Lilly. "It's amazing to me how many people don't realize how vital Downtown can be. It's already safe and clean."

What's not certain is the issue of funding

and where it will come from. No one is exactly sure how much the Eighth Street Project will cost.

"In the state capital, it's budgeted but not yet authorized for the amount of \$30 million, which would primarily fund infrastructure development," VanKirk said. "I'd be shocked if, in the end, it doesn't end up being a half billion-dollar project."

Herb Burger, chairman of the Pittsburgh Task Force, a private group focused mostly on Downtown retail development, has worked closely with VanKirk for decades on civic matters. He said VanKirk is adept at using his legal training to move the residential project forward.

"He's a skilled decision maker, not easily deceived or misled," Burger said.

JUGGLING ACT

VanKirk said the trust and its committees help handle the workload of directing such a large and high-profile project.

But VanKirk is also an expert at directing teams, said Carl Cohen, a Buchanan partner who worked with VanKirk for 27 years and is departing next month to launch a second career as an investment banker.

"Tom's a very smart, talented guy," Cohen said. "He has a lot of energy, and he knows how to manage and delegate, which means he's organized and pays attention to

the things he needs to pay attention to at the right time.

"He's able to leverage his time and skill set to do many things. And he truly cares about the causes he pursues."

Still, it's a juggling act. VanKirk spends half of his time traveling on behalf of Buchanan. Last year he was focused on growing its law and government affairs practices by attracting practice groups from Washington, D.C., New York City and San Diego to Buchanan offices in those cities.

VanKirk had never been to Pittsburgh until Buchanan recruited him. What sold him on the city was how much it reminded him of Cincinnati, where he spent his high school years. A self-described "DuPont brat," VanKirk's father relocated the family dozens of times. The future lawyer attended fourth grade in three different states: Georgia, North Carolina and Delaware.

That peripatetic upbringing influenced him to build his career at one firm. His practice focuses on corporate takeovers, as well as domestic and foreign antitrust matters, and he has long been involved in Buchanan's management, serving as chief operating officer from 1985 until he became CEO in 2003.

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