

Longtime dead end street in downtown Detroit could get new life from new convention hotel



Louis Aguilar

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Detroit – City officials and developers of a proposed hotel next to the convention center aim to refashion a dead-end street into a pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly road that would link downtown's western edge and the popular public spaces by the river.

Overhauling the infrastructure of the western part of Detroit's downtown is something the city and major landowners in the area have studied since at least 2018. The plan actively in the works involves the city, the authority that runs the Huntington Place convention center and the private developer behind the proposed Hotel at Water Square, where the former Joe Louis Arena once stood.

The street that may be transformed is Second Avenue from Fort Street downtown to Steve Yzerman Drive/Atwater Street, which runs parallel to the Detroit River. Currently, Second ends about a quarter of a mile away from the riverfront.

"Downtown is now a neighborhood" whose residents need more streets leading directly to the river, Mayor Mike Duggan recently said at the Detroit Policy Conference, which was held by the Detroit Regional Chamber. About 6,700 residents live downtown, according to the latest U.S. Census Bureau data, which ends at 2021. That's a 25% jump from 2010, according to a Downtown Detroit Partnership [report](#) based on Census Bureau data. With several downtown residential projects under construction or in the planning phases, city officials expect the population to grow in the coming years.



A rendering shows the proposed Hotel at Water Square on the site of the former Joe Louis Arena and the Second Avenue new road and pedestrian path that would reconnect the riverfront with the western edge of downtown Detroit. *Sterling Group*

Duggan and others envision Second Avenue opening an area of downtown where several blocks are cut off from the river by the Lodge Freeway and Huntington Place. Second Avenue has been separated from the riverfront since at least the late 1960s when the Lodge Freeway was constructed.

"What we're going to do on Second Avenue is that the street is going to be opened up with a tree-lined plaza all the way down to the riverfront," Duggan said. "So, now people who live in downtown apartments will be able to walk a few blocks to enjoy the riverfront or jog or bike or whatever they do."

Other city officials said most of the street could also remain open to vehicular traffic. City leaders have not said how a restored Second Avenue would cross the existing southern terminus of the Lodge Freeway and Jefferson Avenue.

'Not just a sidewalk'

From downtown, Second Avenue currently ends at West Congress Street. From Congress to the river, Second doesn't exist at all.

Instead, between Congress and the riverfront, there is a ramp leading to the loading dock of the Huntington Place convention center, the Lodge Freeway and a dead spot where the former Joe Louis Arena once stood. That empty riverfront space is where the proposed Hotel at Water Square could be built.

Officials from the Detroit-based developer Sterling Group spoke about the Second Avenue overhaul at a recent public meeting as part of its overall plans, which still need approval by city officials.

"Second Avenue is really going to be something we haven't seen before in town," said Danny Samson, chief development officer of Sterling Group, during the Jan. 9 public meeting.

The street will be "very pedestrian friendly, very bike friendly, scooters, that sort of thing," Samson said. "It's not just going to be a sidewalk. It's going to be really a very pleasant experience."



A view from Fort Street looking southbound on Second Avenue in downtown Detroit. Second Avenue ends at a parking

At least part of the road will be "bisected" to allow vehicular traffic as well as continue to serve the loading area of the convention center, Samson said.

Sterling Group is also the developer behind the Residences at Water Square, an upscale apartment building also at the site of the former Joe Louis Arena, which was razed between 2019 and 2020. The proposed hotel would be built between the convention center and the new apartment building, which is slated in the coming weeks, according to the developer.

The proposed expanded Second Avenue would end up just a few yards from the Riverwalk, the bicycle-pedestrian path that leads to multiple parks, marinas and a growing network of other bicycle and pedestrian paths such as the Dequindre Cut and the Southwest Greenway.



Rendering of the proposed Hotel at Water Square, on the site of the former Joe Louis Arena, and the Second Avenue new road and pedestrian path that would reconnect the riverfront with the western edge of downtown. *Sterling Group*

At the public meeting where the hotel plans were the main topic, several residents had more to say about the Second Avenue expansion. The hotel would be a glassy 25-story tower that would become the official convention center lodging. Plans call for 600 rooms, 50,000 square feet of event space, two restaurants, a lobby bar and a skybridge linking the hotel directly to Huntington Place.

"The Second Avenue thing is really what a lot of people are most excited about," said Adam Gasper, a downtown resident who spoke during the question-and-answer session with the developer and city officials. He, along with several other downtown residents, also called for improvements to the West Riverfront People Mover station, which is one block from the proposed hotel.

More: [Duggan: Detroit almost out of large parcels, could expand People Mover](#)

Hurdles ahead

But changing Second Avenue and extending it would face challenges. Many details have yet to be worked out about the extension, including how it would overcome the physical barriers, such as the freeway and Jefferson Avenue. Nor is it clear how much taxpayer money it may involve.

Earlier this month, a consultant working with the Detroit Regional Convention Facility Authority, which operates Huntington Place, said the Second Avenue extension is part of an estimated \$65 million to \$70 million in infrastructure changes that would be done in at least two phases. Huntington Place is owned by the city and leased to the Detroit Regional Convention Facility Authority.

"We've completed 30% of the design for the Second Avenue extension across the Lodge Freeway, and we submitted those to the Michigan Department of Transportation in November," said Gordon Wilson with Anderson, Eckstein and Westrick, a Shelby Township-based engineering and architectural firm, which presented the conceptual plan on behalf of the convention authority.

The proposed hotel is not yet a done deal. It is currently going through the city's community benefits process, a law requiring developers to meet with the community to identify benefits and address potential negative effects of the projects in return for receiving tax abatements. That process has begun, and there will be weekly meetings on Tuesday nights until March 5.

The developer aims to begin physical work on the hotel project this year with a target completion date of 2027.

At the first community benefits meeting, city officials said the hotel investment is in the range of \$400 million. At a scheduled Jan. 30 meeting, officials are expected to release the amount of tax abatements and other tax breaks the developer is seeking. The community benefits process takes place in Detroit when the developer seeks over \$1 million in subsidies.

Since 2018, the city and various major stakeholders in the area, such as DTE Energy and Wayne County Community College, began to explore ways to overhaul the west downtown area by tearing down major structures, ranging from the ramp for Exit 1A to the Lodge, and the pedestrian tubes that link the convention center to the nearby parking garage, according to a copy of the study obtained by The Detroit News at the time. The 2018 study estimated the options ranged in cost from \$33 million to \$97 million.



A rendering shows the proposed Hotel at Water Square, on the site of the former Joe Louis Arena, and the Second Avenue new road and pedestrian path that would reconnect the riverfront with the western edge of downtown. Many details have yet to be worked about the extension of Second Avenue, including how it would overcome the physical barriers, such as the Lodge Freeway and Jefferson Avenue. *Sterling Group*

At the Jan. 9 community benefits meeting for the hotel, the director of the city's Planning & Development Department said other major stakeholders are still exploring major changes.

"You will definitely begin to see improvements on Second Avenue all the way from the DTE headquarters to the riverfront," Antoine Bryant said. That would include several more blocks of Second than what's being considered as part of the hotel plan.

"We are at the very beginning stages of design that we do not have a solution yet, but we're hoping to have one ideally by the close of the year," Bryant said. "I can guarantee you'll see developments along Second Avenue and really begin to open up an entire thoroughfare."