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Bedrock unveils 30-year vision for downtown Cleveland's riverfront

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Bedrock, the Detroit-based owner of the Tower City mall and a sweep of riverfront land behind it, has a 30-year vision for remaking that waterfront with offices, homes, retail and parks.

Bedrock CEO Kofi Bonner unveiled the high-level concept Wednesday, Sept. 15, during a heavily scripted virtual news conference with Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson. Bonner described the plan as a public-private-philanthropic partnership — a development that will require massive infrastructure investments and take decades to realize.

The announcement came as Jackson approaches the end of his 16-year mayoral run, the morning after voters narrowed the crowded field of candidates vying to replace him. The timing clearly was motivated, at least in part, by the unprecedented flood of federal money flowing to communities to blunt the fallout from the pandemic, stimulate the economy and replace aging roads and bridges.

The Jackson administration plans to send legislation to Cleveland City Council outlining "the spirit" of the deal, the mayor said, but there is no development agreement that speaks to specifics about costs, timelines and expectations for both parties.

"What we will do is look at something that will memorialize the fact that we want to work together, as a public-private partnership, to bring together this project," said Jackson, who acknowledged that the next mayor and council will be responsible for the details.

Bedrock's proposal builds on [Vision for the Valley](#), a sweeping plan for reimagining 8 miles of the Cuyahoga River, stretching south from Lake Erie. The company's parking lots along Collision Bend are a focal point of the 317-page plan, which was [adopted](#) by the Cleveland City Planning Commission in July.

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Bonner, a former Cleveland Browns chief administrative officer who became [Bedrock](#)'s CEO last year, talked about extending downtown to the river with modern infrastructure and new, broadly accessible public spaces. The remade riverfront could accommodate thousands of homes, millions of square feet of offices, and new retail and hospitality development, he said.

The city and Bedrock are focused on a 130-acre footprint, where Bedrock owns about 30% of the property, Bonner said. Bedrock won't be the only developer involved.

The cost of such an ambitious vision isn't clear — but it will be huge.

"We all need to organize ourselves to position Cleveland as best as we can to be able to access the infrastructure funds that will be coming from the federal government," Bonner said, referring to the \$1 trillion infrastructure bill making its painstaking way through Congress.

Baiju Shah, CEO of the Greater Cleveland Partnership, joined Bonner and Jackson for the event. He stressed the importance of alignment between public and private partners as Cleveland makes a case for federal funds for roads, public transit and other work.

"This plan complements and connects to major initiatives throughout out city," he said, alluding to other major projects, including a \$229 million land bridge from the downtown malls to the lakefront championed by the Cleveland Browns and planned renovations at Progressive Field, that also will require considerable public investments.

"Taken together," Shah said, "these projects, all vital, all complementary, have the potential to transform downtown."

Although there is no formal deal between the city and Bedrock, Jackson and Bonner both mentioned commitments around job creation, construction contracting, local suppliers and opportunities for Cleveland residents to build wealth. Those subjects, and the ideals of equity and inclusivity, are likely to be written into whatever agreement the developer and the city ultimately reach, Bonner said.

"These next several years are going to be critical in learning about the problems and determining the best way to benefit Clevelanders in this 30-year transformation," said Laura Grannemann, vice president of strategic

investments at the [Rocket Community Fund](#), the philanthropic arm of Detroit-area billionaire Dan Gilbert's Rock family of companies.

Bedrock bought the troubled Avenue shopping mall at Tower City and associated parking in 2016. Company affiliates have controlled land along the river since 2011, when Gilbert's former gaming group paid \$85 million for 16 acres and air rights behind the mall.

Originally, that land was earmarked for a casino and related development. But Gilbert dropped those plans years ago, in favor of focusing on a much smaller casino he opened in the Higbee Building on Public Square in 2012. Gilbert sold his interest in the gaming business, JACK Entertainment, last year.

In July, Bonner announced Bedrock's plans to [reposition](#) the mall as a "marketplace" — a space more dedicated to experiences than traditional shopping. The company is pursuing local and national tenants for the heavily vacant space, which perches atop Cleveland's central train station and is flanked by offices, hotels and apartments.

Bedrock plans to announce some new leases within 30 days, Bonner said. The landlord is bringing in at least three Black-owned local tenants, he said, and about 10 other deals are in the works. "That is outside of this current agreement," he said, drawing a distinction between nascent turnaround plans for the mall and the company's much broader riverfront vision.

Jackson said redeveloping Collision Bend will create a necessary link between large projects, from The Sherwin-Williams Co.'s [future headquarters](#) on Public Square to stabilization of the imperiled [Irishtown Bend hillside](#) across the river. And he suggested that the partnership between the city and Bedrock, as it is fleshed out, could serve as a model for other deals.

"This is not just bricks and mortar," he said. "It is a tool that ... can demonstrate that this is how you do business when you come to Cleveland."