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AltonWorks innovation: Building on the past, banking on the future

By MELISSA CROCKETT MESKE

On Monday, Aug. 15, Governor JB Pritzker made rounds throughout Southwestern Illinois, delivering good news in the way of funding for downtown development projects that will inevitably alter the workforce climate and shape tomorrow's leaders in ways of which were once only dreamed.

In Alton, it's all about innovation.

AltonWorks CEO John Simmons and President Jayne Simmons welcomed Gov. Pritzker and several other special guests to their headquarters in Alton on Monday afternoon to share a major announcement.

Together, they announced the establishment of the Wedge Innovation Center, a \$21 million revitalization project that will transform the former Wedge Bank and Elfgan buildings in the 600 block of East Broadway into an entrepreneurial and business accelerator, incubator, co-working space, and digital hub.

This is part of an overall strategic plan for AltonWorks that involves the renovation of 25 historic buildings it owns in downtown Alton, some of which are operating now and others that are forthcoming.

"At AltonWorks, we believe that innovation is foundational to transformational change, and it underpins our overall strategy," explained AltonWorks CEO John Simmons. "Each area of economic development that we are focused on overlaps and sustains the others by



Alton Mayor David Goins addresses attendees from the podium at the official announcement on Aug. 15 by AltonWorks of the planned Wedge Innovation Center. Also visible in the photo left of Mayor Goins is Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker and AltonWorks CEO John Simmons. (Melissa Crockett Meske/Illinois Business Journal)

creating communities of people who support each other. I'm convinced, with the right investments combined with a big, can-do attitude, Alton can become a bright light of innovation, opportunity and equity for this entire region."

Gov. Pritzker had come to town to announce that Alton's Wedge Innovation Center would be receiving \$3 million in funding support from the state through its Rebuild Illinois Downtowns

and Main Streets Capital Program.

"AltonWorks is changing downtown Alton," Pritzker said. "And with that upgraded infrastructure comes economic opportunity: more jobs, more business growth, and more money pouring into the communities that need it most- which perfectly encapsulates the guiding principle behind the Downtowns and Main Streets Capital Grant program."

"The Wedge" will have a focus on social impact innovation and specialize in livability, clean tech and climate tech to benefit everyday lives. With its incubator and co-working space assets, it will include private office spaces, a fiber network, free Wi-Fi, conference and training space availability, and the possibility for a restaurant and retail space on its ground floor.

Construction is slated to start in October 2022, with a projected date for the Wedge Innovation Center opening in second quarter 2024. BSI Constructors, Inc. of St. Louis is the general contractor for the project, and Ko and Company Inc. owned by Kiku Obata & Company, is its architect.

Simmons said that the \$21 million for the project is coming through bank financing, private investment and historic tax credits. The \$3 million State of Illinois grant funding would be an added funding source.

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Inside The CAVE: Where futures are bright and innovation comes alive

By MELISSA CROCKETT MESKE

At the start of a new academic year for Belleville Township High School District 201 came the debut of its newest innovation in teaching and learning: A bright and clean learning facility now known as "The CAVE."

The Center for Academic Vocational Excellence broke ground in March 2022. Just five months later, the brand new vocational and alternative education center welcomed faculty and students into the halls of this former Kings Point Sports Club off Route 15 as the new school year began. Millennium Construction of Lebanon, Ill., led the real-time development of bringing this project's vision alive.

Superintendent Brian Mentzer hosted a preview tour that included staff members of U.S. Sen. Tammy Duckworth (D-Ill.), Belleville Mayor Patty Gregory, regional workforce development representatives and other District 201 administrators along with the IBJ just a few days before teachers and students would begin to experience and benefit from this shared passion project.

The CAVE houses the district's career and technical education programs as well as its alternative education students. But that's not all. It also serves as a recreational and training hub for the 201's athletic programs.

"We have instruction in the trades, skilled careers, and in entrepreneurship here. We have our CAVE Exploration program as well for our lower grades," Mentzer noted during the walking tour. "We've added nine new CTE [career and technical education] teachers this year. And we've also installed about 40,000-square-foot of new turf for our district's sports and athletes."

"Our main goals: To remove barriers and to increase access," Mentzer stressed. This is something Mentzer continued to emphasize throughout the steps of the tour.

The CAVE features quality classrooms, cutting-edge technology, and comfortable desks throughout its multi-level instructional facilities. But wait, there's more...

For example, the Culinary Arts classrooms and lab training area features state-of-the-art commercial kitchen equipment and a full walk-in freezer designed for instruction as well as for hands-on experiences. Students will have the opportunity to directly take part in food preparation and catering for the district and its activities as a part of their vocational learning.

In fact, students will have the chance to develop a multitude of skills at The CAVE, Mentzer noted, including the culinary arts as well as other trade and industry areas of specialization such as welding, metalworking and machining, carpentry,



This is an exterior shot of the new Belleville District 201's facility for career, technical and alternative education known as The CAVE. (Melissa Crockett Meske/Illinois Business Journal)

construction, automotive technology, technology, childcare, and even more.

Along with more than a dozen classrooms, The CAVE also features a cafeteria on-site, a commons area for students to gather and relax, office space, space for athletic training and workout activities, computer lab, conference room, workstations, early childhood education observation room and more on its two floors, and a lower level with room for further expansion of The CAVE's collectively shared passion and vision.

Areas have also been designed for career counseling, industry and trades mentoring, as well as for credentialing and certification testing as required for some career fields, such as automotive technology.

The advanced programming offered through The CAVE's academic programming and skills training is designed with the possibility of students moving toward some sort of accreditation beyond that of a traditional high school diploma.

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