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CENTERPIECE

'It is Ashland's time': City breaks ground on \$34M conference center

By Aaron Snyder The Daily Independent
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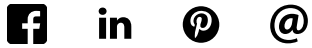


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From left to right, Marty Gute, Cheryl Spriggs, Rocky Adkins, Matt Perkins, Andy Beshear, Josh Blanton, Amanda Clark and DJ Rymer throw dirt to signify the groundbreaking for a conference center coming to Ashland.

Aaron Snyder \ The Daily Independent



ASHLAND When Ashland hosted the Appalachian Regional Commission Conference in September 2023, city officials craved the chance to escort the governor through downtown, divulge revitalization plans to him and pose a pivotal question.

Rocky Adkins, Senior Adviser to Gov. Andy Beshear, remembers the walk — and the talk — vividly.

“I knew the real punchline was coming; I knew the real sell was coming,” Adkins said. “... As we approached and got down this way, the conversation turned to, Governor, we need a convention/conference center here in the city of Ashland ... not only for the city, but for Boyd County and the tri-state area. and the governor asked a really important question — ‘well, I’m for it, but how much is it going to cost?’”

Beshear, Adkins, Sen. Robin Webb, Mayor Matt Perkins and city commissioners were among those who graced the stage on the parking lot next to the Paramount Arts Center on Tuesday morning.

The city conducted a groundbreaking ceremony for a \$34 million conference center as a longtime vision reaches fruition. The state earmarked \$25 million for the project. A \$1 million federal AMLER grant, \$750,000 from the Woodlands Foundation and a \$10 million bond — paid through transient tax revenue — will comprise the funding.

The original intended location was next to the Delta-Marriott Hotel — the site of the former Ashland Oil building.

However, when the city purchased the Paramount Arts Center property for \$3 million in recent weeks, it was a game-changer.

The city executed a development agreement with AP3 LLC for the development, design and construction of the two-story, 20,000-square-foot conference center. It will attach to the 93-year-old “iconic” Paramount, as Adkins referred to it.

Mayor Matt Perkins called the plans a product of a “critical vision” by leaders of the past — including the late Mayor Steve Gilmore — and the present. He credited major employers UK King’s Daughters and Marathon as well as Boyd County for their support — reflecting the “strong bond and spirit of cooperation between the city and county.” He thanked the Northeast Kentucky Chamber of Commerce, the Woodlands Foundation and expressed personal gratitude toward Brandy Clark and Visit AKY for helping the city reach the monumental day.

Sam Howard, of AP3, said it's important to remember history but to not dwell on it. He said the conference will not compete against the Paramount. Rather, it will complement it, hopefully operating in conjunction as they will be "tied together."

Webb said Ashland deserves an opportunity to have a venue like many other cities in the Commonwealth possess.

"As Mayor Gilmore would say, 'this is good news,'" she said.

Adkins called Tuesday's groundbreaking "a celebration." He emphasized the weightiness of cherishing "special days like today."

"The economic spinoff is going to be tremendous," he said.

A study two years ago concluded a conference center could carry an economic impact of \$12.9 million annually and could entail up to 115 jobs.



While some citizens have expressed concerns about the construction's negative effects and the elimination of a parking lot, Adkins said a city should look forward to a day where it is thriving so much that it's a struggle to find a parking place.

"If this doesn't excite you, you don't have a pulse," Adkins said in front of a large crowd.

"This will be first class and second to none here in the heartbeat of eastern Kentucky," Adkins said.

Beshear called Ashland a vibrant community and an ideal location for the conference center. He said the "ARC folks" are still talking about how hospitable and suitable Ashland was as a host for its conference in 2023.

"It is Ashland's time," Beshear said.

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