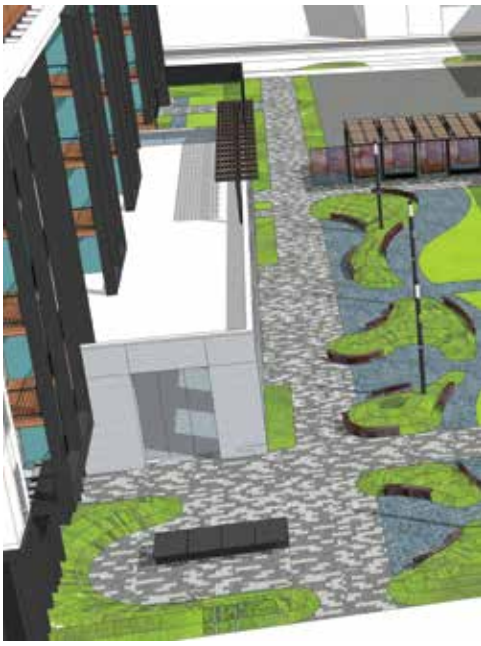
Adjacent to the landmark Greyhound Bus Station (now a Bru Burger restaurant), the Post House will feature a linear park atop an underground parking structure. This designated gathering spot will include a huge outdoor TV screen and community elements.



SMART DEVELOPMENT

Evansville Creating Living Laboratory

By Rebecca Patrick

"Too smart for your own good" doesn't apply to the lure of modern technology.

From turning on appliances to closing blinds to even providing that last answer to a crossword puzzle, intelligent conveniences are increasingly in demand and just a touch or voice command away.

Most of these sophistications are plug and play, with the homeowner making the purchases, installing the systems and controlling settings in various apps.

But in the not-too-distant-future, southwest Indiana will have taken things to a new and unified level: a smart living complex with a collection of offerings that doubles as a critical research lab for how consumers use energy technologies.

Setting the stage

The $40 million Post House – its name taken from the historical post office across the street – will be a mixed use development in Evansville that also features ground-level retail and commercial space. Vectren Corp., the utility partner, will have a research center at the complex.

The project has dual pursuits of providing more housing in the core area of the city and establishing the region as a leader in adaptive energy research.

Greg Wathen, president and CEO of the Economic Development Coalition of Southwest Indiana, recalls how the idea was born.

"Five of us were sitting in a room and asking if there was a way to leverage what a company like Vectren would need – a controlled environment where they could test new technology and then be able to see how people interact with it in a controlled environment where you scale it out system wide."

Another proposal from two young entrepreneurs, Brandon Scott and Mark Thompson, focused on millennials and bringing vibrancy to the downtown Evansville area via a community destination where people could not only live but be entertained.

Ultimately, both concepts were combined, woven into the city's master plan and awarded $9 million from the state's Regional Cities Initiative program.

Indianapolis-based Scannell Properties won the bid to lead the effort.

"We had four large Midwest development groups vying for the Post House, and the three that didn't get it were disappointed. But you know what, we've introduced them to the market for other opportunities," Wathen recounts.

"Out of that, we have also had other development groups looking at us now that had never considered us in the past. Getting someone like Scannell to come in, it gets us on the radar screen of others."

What's also piquing people's interest – across the country and even beyond – is the data collection component that makes the Post House a living laboratory.

Yet, it's not a requirement to provide feedback, as tenants will be able to opt in or opt out based on what information they want to share.

"It's a lot like when you get into clinical trials for pharmaceuticals; some people's (living spaces) will have certain things and others won't," Wathen explains. "We are going to monitor them to see how they use it. It should help folks like Vectren and whomever all the ultimate partners might be."

State of the art

The 144 units are split between two buildings, with the smaller

While the project is just underway, Vectren's Robbie Sears says the concept has drawn the attention of the U.S. Department of Energy, which has "shown a great deal of interest in the development and utilizing some of what we are doing there" in terms of managing energy usage.

one – about a third of the apartments – having the most robust technological and energy-efficient offerings.

All rooftops will be solar and Nest (smart) thermostats, for example, will also be in each of the units.

The Sense Home Energy Monitor will actively manage energy usage within the home.

"It gives the customer insight, through the app, of which appliances are using how much energy. It gives them information in real time instead of waiting until the end of the month and getting your bill," describes Robbie Sears, vice president of energy solutions and planning at Vectren.

Historical usage over time is also available.

There will be smart water heaters, with some apartments having a water and space heating combination system.

Sears offers a scenario in which this collective package could function.

"Theoretically, it would be able to say, 'Hey, there is no one here. I can close the blinds and set the thermostat back a little bit. I'll turn off x number of lights' that the owner/resident approves in these conditions. It goes into somewhat of an energy saving mode."

What perhaps is most convenient for residents will be the ability to have control over all the various smart elements in a single platform or centralized app. That would mean no toggling between programs to adjust a thermostat or work the smart appliances.

And it's not just the tenants. The property manager, as people move in and out, will have overriding command.

The apartments will not be more expensive with rent at market rate or "whatever the market will bear," Wathen says. "But I expect there will be high demand for them. From empty nesters to millennials to Gen Z's."

The enthusiasm over the project is evident.

Sears raves, "With the combination of what we are doing, this is one of the most, if not the most, advanced developments going on in the country right now."

Feedback matters

Vectren's testing concentrates around two elements: advanced energy collection through solar batteries and peak load management.

A total of 28 units in the smaller building will be tied to battery storage devices. These backups will provide residents the ability to keep things running in their apartment during a power outage.

From the utility side, the batteries could provide welcome grid relief on hot summer days.

"We can actually have those batteries discharge back onto our systems to provide those extra boosts of energy within our system as well. The batteries then basically power part of the appliances in the apartments and allow the other energy we generate to go serve other customers," Sears conveys.

"It's a smaller version of a test opportunity to see if we have batteries on a shared basis or on individual homes or residential living units that we and the customers can benefit from."

Roland Rosario, Vectren's manager of energy technologies, discusses the necessity to learn how to best blend resources.

"As the industry changes, we see how important that distributed distribution is and integrating those resources on the grid, so they work the best with all the assets that we have and for our customers. … More and more, technology allows us to control those things in such a way that we preserve the comfort of the user, and those devices can work together to help everybody's cost and energy use come down."

Desired outcomes

Wathen's expectations are set high for what the Post House will mean for his community.

"We want it to set the tone for smart development as we move forward for not just downtown but the entire region. This is what smart development should look like," he declares.

"It's one of those things that if you do it right, it's not that much more expensive. But what it does is provide a lot of value and long-term value for not just the community but for people who reside in it."

Wathen further breaks it down in economic development terms.

"It's now less about jobs and more about talent acquisition, retention and attraction. And how do we do that very thing? Part of it is ensuring that your communities are ones people actually want to live in, work in and play in.

"That's a different conversation than saying we want to attract in another company and expect that organically people are going to gravitate to your community because you have job openings. Every community has job openings. It's everything else," he contends.

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Sears makes a point of stressing that once the Post House is operational, it is just the beginning.

"It's not that we will install these and it will be done. Over time, we will look to try new technologies and as we learn from the data, evolve technologies."

Vectren will use the compiled Post House information to help define its pursuit of what an energy company should be in the future.

"We believe it's more than just providing the power and providing the lines that get the power to the customer," Sears shares. "The hope is that (the Post House) allows us to continue to build on how we work better with customers for the comfort, lifestyle they desire while also helping them to manage energy costs."

He's also quick to add, "I don't want to overplay the emphasis that it is solely with Vectren. We want to be one of the premier partners in the research and testing, but it's really broader than that.

"We are trying to create a space that has the Internet of Things – could be comfort related, security related and other such companies that might want to come here in the lab environment. And we are looking for those. … That's the concept this was built on."

RESOURCES: Robbie Sears and Roland Rosario, Vectren, at www.vectren.com | Greg Wathen, Economic Development Coalition of Southwest Indiana, at www.southwestindiana.org