



Out of this world

(by Julia Werner - October 14, 2009)

Beginning in late October the Delmar Loop is expanding...by about 3 billion miles.

For three years Stephen Walker, a St. Louis native and author of *Lemp: The Haunting History*, has worked to bring a walking scale model of the solar system to St. Louis. After toiling with design sketches, measurements and location scouting, he said the opening of the Loop's Moonrise Hotel earlier this year was the missing piece of the puzzle.

"Something just clicked and I knew immediately that's where it should go," Walker said. He then proposed the idea to Joe Edwards, owner of the Moonrise and several other prominent Loop businesses, who was onboard immediately.

The Loop Planet Walk will stretch 2,880 feet along Delmar Boulevard, beginning with the sun at the Moonrise Hotel and ending with Neptune at Cicero's restaurant. A signpost will mark each planet with information, including its diameter, distance from the sun, temperature and namesake.

"There will be just enough information on it that it will be interesting to people, but not too much information where they'll get overwhelmed," Edwards said.

Walker said he was first inspired by the Sagan Planet Walk in Ithaca, N.Y. This was just the first of many planet walks he researched over the next few years, noting the differences in scale, placement and practicality of each. This allowed him to evaluate all the perceived strengths and weaknesses of his potential St. Louis model.

He explained that some planet walks are designed with incidental time constraints — certain markers are placed inside a building, which, being closed on occasion, limits the availability of the display. He believes other planet walks are exceedingly large and tedious to complete with several miles separating each planet.

Walker said he hopes to avoid such problems with the Loop Planet Walk by keeping it entirely outdoors and spanning only a few blocks. The location, being a crowded business district, challenged Walker with many potential navigation problems. Fortunately, he says, he didn't run into any placement issues while mapping out the signposts.

"To have a responsible model you can claim as scientifically accurate, you can't



Nora Jehle photo

Joe Edwards shows off one of the signs for Planet Walk, which opens later this month.

very well move something 10 feet away because it's inconvenient," he said. "It was just lucky we didn't end up in an intersection or right in the middle of a tree. The odds were against us."

In addition to luck, the project seems to have the blessing of everyone involved. Since Walker had already done most of the creative legwork, Edwards took readily to organizing the business end.

Director of Community Development in University City Lehman Walker (no relation to Stephen Walker) discussed the project with Edwards and recommended that the Economic Development and Retail Sales Tax Board fund the project, which it did in the amount of \$10,000.

"It's an exciting project and University City supports it 100 percent," Lehman Walker said.

The city of St. Louis also contributed half of the funds, bringing the total budget to \$20,000. The combined funding makes the project a true collaboration, as the planet walk will span both the city and the county.

"It's nice to have a project that everybody enjoys and supports," Edwards said. "It's a unifying project."

Due to the overwhelming support, and determination of Edwards and Walker, the Loop Planet Walk is scheduled to be up and running by late October. "There's a very good chance it will be up while the weather's still nice for walking," Edwards said.

Walker explained that a website (www.loopplanetwalk.com), as well as souvenir items such as posters and T-shirts, will accompany the planet walk opening. He hopes this will promote the project and also create some overall cohesion.

"I tried to use branding — making a logo, making a website — just like a company does when they introduce a product," Walker said. "There's some consistency, some graphic appeal, certain graphic elements that are uniform throughout."

The planet walk will join the St. Louis Walk of Fame as a permanent, 24-hour, free attraction in the Loop. Walker hopes that it will become a field-trip destination and stimulate interest in science.

"One thing I hope everyone gets out of this is just an enjoyable way to learn about the solar system. Really you can't get this from a book, you can't see this online, you actually have to experience it," he said. "Maybe the next Carl Sagan will come to his career via the planet walk."

