

Arizona Daily Star®

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Published: 03.07.2007

Casa Grande mall to open in fall

By Levi J. Long

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

A new shopping center in Casa Grande plans to open by fall with developers hoping to draw shoppers not only from Pinal County, but from travelers heading along Interstate 10 from Mexico, Tucson and Phoenix.

The Promenade at Casa Grande, a regional outdoor shopping center, on Tuesday named the first tenants scheduled to open at the 1-million-square-foot retail project.

They include Best Buy, J.C. Penney, Kohl's, Staples, Target and Harkins Theatres, which plans to open a 14-screen multiplex, said retail developers of the center, which include Phoenix-based WDP Partners, The Pederson Group and Westcor.

The project, which broke ground in 2006, will open phases one and two by this fall. A third phase is projected to open by spring 2008.

The Promenade sits on 130 acres on the northeast corner of Interstate 10 and Florence Boulevard in Casa Grande.

It's being built as a "regional lifestyle center," which often blends shops, restaurants and entertainment venues with designs meant to resemble downtown streetscapes or villages with walkways and open-air plazas.

The Promenade will also feature an interactive "town center," designed to promote a sense of community, said Todd Chester, principal of WDP Partners.

Retail first for Casa Grande

Though a few grocery stores and other retailers have opened recently, the Promenade is considered the first major retail project to operate in Casa Grande, a growing city with about 34,000 residents.

Project developers say the center will draw shoppers from western and central Pinal County including Coolidge, Florence, Eloy, Arizona City and Sacaton.

Those towns are part of an area expected to exceed a half-million residents by 2016, according

to Westcor figures.

"We're going to bring the type of retail here that residents want," Chester said. "People in Pinal County don't have to shop outside of their community anymore. They won't have to drive to Phoenix or Tucson."

Though more than 200,000 residents in greater Pinal County now shop in Casa Grande, most people tend to drive to Phoenix for stores not found in the area.

"We've always suffered from a retail bleed-off," said Casa Grande Mayor Charles T. Walton Sr.

"Anyone in business will tell you they lose sales to the Valley. It's been happening since the day we were born," he said.

The city estimates that the Promenade will bring \$4 million annually in local city sales tax, a 35 percent increase in the city's tax base, said Larry Rains, finance director for the city of Casa Grande.

"Coming at the right time"

In the last fiscal year, the city brought in \$15.8 million, which funded Casa Grande's fire and police departments.

"This project is coming at just the right time. It's going to be a real lifesaver for us," Walton said.

With its mix of shops, eateries and entertainment venues, developers also hope to lure customers driving along the I-10 corridor between Phoenix, Tucson and Sonora, Mexico to shop at the Promenade.

About 125,000 business and leisure travelers drive along that route each day, according to Westcor figures.

Locating a regional center next to a major corridor that joins Phoenix, Tucson and Mexico opens up a tremendous opportunity for retailers, said Melinda Burke, director of the University of Arizona's Terry J. Lundgren Center for Retailing.

"It's a corridor that almost knows no boundaries," she said, citing shoppers who often drive along the Interstate to frequent stores in Phoenix, Tucson and Mexico. "It used to be that boundaries were at the city limits but those limits are gradually receding. There's a willingness to travel a little further to shop."

Other developers interested

With an emphasis on access and comfort, mall developers in recent years have been focusing exclusively on building more regional lifestyle centers because they are a good fit for urban and transient populations, Burke said.

"They are generally easy to get in and out of and reach wide varieties of age groups," Burke said. "They're especially popular though among Millennials and Generation Y, who like the mix of

entertainment options with restaurants, food and shopping."

Interest among other developers to build retail centers in Casa Grande has increased in the last couple of years, said Rains, Casa Grande's finance director.

Other possible developments in Casa Grand include a master-planned community of about 33,000 homes, would include 5 million square feet of shopping when it's completed in about five years, Walton said.

That growth would be welcome, said Don Tyler, designated broker for Scottsdale-based Summit Properties, which owns the 15-year-old Outlets At Casa Grande.

"It's nothing but a positive for the community," Tyler said. "It's a going to create a great retail corridor along I-10."

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