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Gilbert auto mall opening pushed back

By Beth Lucas
Tribune

Gilbert's long anticipated auto mall is expected to open the doors to its first dealership in March - instead of this month. The first dealer, Santan Ford, originally had been planned to open in November, but was unable to gain access to the land to begin construction as early as planned, Santan Ford owner Chris Guerrero said.

At 17 acres, his dealership will be one of the four largest in the state, with an expected 2,500 vehicles sold a year, including new and used vehicles and utility trucks for businesses.

"It's definitely going to be a big deal," Guerrero said.

His dealership will also have a five-lane service drive offering speedy services for all nameplates, he said.

Auto mall developer Bill Lund said a Saturn dealer is also delayed for an undetermined time due to the owner's death. The delay of the openings follows a previous six-month delay due to local weather and Hurricane Katrina, which slowed up delivery of construction supplies.

Henry Brown Buick Pontiac GMC is expected to open during the third quarter of 2007, and Earnhardt Chrysler Jeep Dodge by the end of 2007, Lund said.

"It'll be a very positive impact by the end of next year," he said.

Town Manager George Pettit said the town had budgeted with the expectation that a dealer would be open by late this year.

The latest delay will cost the town about a half-million dollars in anticipated sales tax revenue, but Pettit said a higher than expected corporate sales tax base is protecting the town from having to make any cuts to its budget.

The 130-acre auto mall at the southwest corner of Val Vista Drive and the Santan Freeway, is expected to bring in an estimated \$120 million in sales taxes in its first 10 years, as much as \$60 million of which will be go to auto dealers as incentives to open as soon as possible.

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