

CityNorth billed as posh urban oasis

Residents can live, work, eat, play in luxury

Michael Clancy - The Arizona Republic, February 2, 2008

The first phase of the multibillion-dollar development CityNorth is under construction, and the developer promises that by the time the project is finished, it will be like nothing the Phoenix area has seen.

A luxury shopping area, a mixed-use development, a new downtown or an urban oasis, whatever people call it, Kenneth Himmel promises, it will draw people from far and wide to live, work and enjoy shopping choices, entertainment options or even environmentally-sensitive architecture.

The first phase, two blocks of an office, shopping, dining and residential street that is taking shape, will be open in October. The developers call it High Street.

Himmel, president and chief executive officer of Related Urban Development, managing partner on the project, was in town last weekend to open the project's Sales Center, where visitors can get their first close look at what CityNorth is all about.

He is back this weekend, both for the Super Bowl and to promote the development.

Himmel has the highest of hopes for CityNorth, in spite of the nation's and the area's economic issues and real-estate downturn. The company, a 50/50 partner with the Thomas J. Klutznick Co., is well-situated to wait things out, he said.

"We've never missed yet" with a project of this type, he said, "and we are not going to miss here."

Related, which promotes its involvement in at least half a dozen similar projects, is overseeing development of the core of CityNorth, 70 acres at the center of the property at 56th Street and Loop 101. CityNorth ultimately will include an additional 70 acres surrounding the core area, which will consist of office buildings along Loop 101 and condos along 56th Street.

The sales center includes several displays aimed at luring home buyers, office tenants and businesses to the project.

The center includes a large scale model of the project's core, an animated film presentation across five monitors, offices for real-estate sales and samples of the 99 condos offered for sale.

The prices range from about \$450,000 to more than \$1 million, broker Bill Hammond said. Already, Hammond said, numerous homes have been reserved, although he declined to provide a number.

Besides the 99 residences, High Street will include six restaurants and 44 shops.

Fewer than half have been identified, in spite of promises by the developers, possibly as a consequence of the economy.

A year after High Street opens, the second phase of the project will debut, including more residences, restaurants, shops and at least one department store, Nordstrom.

It will include the area known as the Boulevard, with unique architecture and public spaces.

Himmel said Related will try to build relationships with community arts organizations and others to utilize the Boulevard.

"This is a very comprehensive, complex project," Himmel said. "Every piece is unusual from a department store's point of view. We are setting the bar at the top of where they have been."

At the same time, he said, the project will not be exclusive.

"We are very sensitive not to become a luxury enclave," Himmel said. "We want to appeal to a wide variety of people."

On a holiday-season weekend, Himmel said, the development could see as many as 80,000 visitors in a single day.

Renderings and models of the project show modern buildings with clean lines and plenty of glass.

Himmel said the inspiration came from Frank Lloyd Wright, who spent part of his life in the desert at Taliesin West, about 10 miles away.

"This is a modern interpretation of what we think he might do," Himmel said. "We are defining desert architecture in an urban scheme."

It will include plenty of glass, arcades, landscaping, misting systems and other means to make summers bearable, he said.

Similarities to Kierland Commons, a much smaller mixed use development at Greenway and Scottsdale roads, are not accidental. Architect Brad Nelsen and his Scottsdale firm were involved in both projects.

The other architectural partner is Elkus/Manfredi of Boston, which has worked with Related Urban on other projects.

Himmel said the project would be LEED certified, a green building designation given by the U.S. Green Building Council. Primarily that means the builders will use sustainable materials, seek to minimize energy needs and attempt to recycle construction waste.