

Improvements to west Mesa's Fiesta District under way

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By Michelle Reese, Tribune |

Bit by bit, Mesa's Fiesta District is being transformed.

Both public and private projects are under way in an area hit hard by the recession. No one may be more excited than Mesa Councilman Dennis Kavanaugh, who represents the area.

From the new \$14.9 million performing arts center for Mesa Community College at a former Harkins Theatre to renovations at Hilton Phoenix East Mesa to new restaurants, Kavanaugh said there is reason to celebrate.

"When we looked at it all as one, it gave us cause for optimism that all the work of the last number of years is starting to come together in a positive way to change the look, feel and atmosphere in the district. It's been a good a thing," he said during an interview this week.

One big change is at the 17-acre Poca Fiesta Center, on the northeast corner of Southern Avenue and Alma School Road. It was bought by Scottsdale-based Hinkson Company and renamed Fiesta Commons. New signs with a new look are on the way, Kavanaugh said. Big Lots and Hibachi Grill opened earlier this year and Blast Fitness will open in December in the former movie theater at the site.

LongHorn Steakhouse, a member of the Darden Restaurants, is under construction at Fiesta Mall.

"They have successful operations with Olive Garden and Red Lobster in the Fiesta District. Those are doing well. They think the demographics are good in that area," Kavanaugh said.

Several hotels in the area are making changes. The Courtyard by Marriott, 1221 S. Westwood Drive, is scheduled to undergo a \$2.5 million renovation of its lobby and all 149 rooms.

Hilton Phoenix/East Mesa, 1011 W. Holmes Ave., already upgraded Wi-Fi in the hotel, said manager Gary Levine. A new business center with Apple and PC products is coming in and all 260 rooms will be given a "contemporary look" with new paint, tubs, tile and more.

"The good news is we've had enough business that things wear down. So you do — every few years — make the rooms look more contemporary and just refresh it because you've had thousands of people going through those rooms all year round," he said. "Things have gotten better. We've been busy. We've had better occupancy."

The city is investing in the area, as well. This summer, ground broke on a new police station. A streetscape improvement project will start next month, Kavanaugh said.

"We're really excited about that," the Hilton's Levine said. "I think that's the best thing that will happen in this area. It will make a great sense of arrival off the (U.S.) 60 and Alma School and take away that commercial look and make it more residential in a way."

More development could be coming, Kavanaugh said. The 15-acre Fiesta Village, at the northwest corner of Alma School Road and Southern Avenue, has been considered an eyesore the last few years. It was put on the market in July.

"I know it's one of the sites the city has been directing brokers to. The city has worked with the Arizona Commerce Authority to identify it as a potential employment site when employers come in looking for large sites like that. At least it's in play," he said.

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