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Mesa's Fiesta District undergoes yet another revitalization

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Fiesta District

This architect's rendering shows a possible future look for the Fiesta Mall.



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By Jenny Ung, Special to Tribune

The Fiesta District is not what it once was — it is not the big financial office center like it was in the '80s, nor is it the ultimate attraction for retailers and restaurants as it was 20 years ago.

Yet, efforts to revitalize the area have prevailed and are expected to continue for the next several years.

The Fiesta corporate campus in the Fiesta Mall and Southern Avenue streetscape improvements are part of the city of Mesa's plans to revitalize the district.

"The revitalization of the area is being done to basically bring back or make the Fiesta District more of an inviting destination place," said Michele Arrollado, communications specialist for the city of Mesa.

As retail competition in the East Valley grew, changes in population resulted in retailers closing or moving to other locations, Mesa Vice Mayor Dennis Kavanaugh said. As big-box retailers, such as Big Lots, moved out, the city of Mesa decided something needed to be done.

The city started hosting meetings in 2003 to discuss the Fiesta Mall and the area, Kavanaugh said. The city began to work with redevelopment and transportation consultants to brand the area's infrastructure, he said.

Planning

Two plans for the Fiesta District were approved by the City Council, said Lori Gary, economic

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development project manager of Mesa. The Fiesta District design handbook was created in 2009 and the Fiesta District implementation plan was created in 2011, she said.

Arizona State University has been a big partner in the plans, despite not being located in the area, Kavanaugh said.

"The planning and architecture classes helped to create plans for our streetscapes," Kavanaugh said. "They've helped us a lot in imagining how we want to change the look."

Dean Brennan, professor at ASU's School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning, spent several semesters working on the Fiesta District plans with his urban planning students.

Brennan was approached when the city of Mesa was looking for ideas for the Southern Avenue and Fiesta Mall areas. After speaking to the planning committee, Brennan began drafting the plans with the help of his students.

The planning committee "really liked the possibilities of this class working on the district," he said. "The students were very much involved in the process."

Brennan and his students hosted two public meetings at the Fiesta Mall, inviting stakeholders from around the area to participate, he said. They conducted an online survey and talked to business owners to get a sense of what the area was and how it could be improved.

Fiesta corporate campus

One idea suggested by Brennan's students several years ago is now being implemented: converting large, vacant spaces in the Fiesta Mall to office spaces.

As part of the revitalization process, a new office center will be built in the Fiesta Mall's former Macy's building, with room for as many as 1,300 employees.

Verde Fiesta I LLC, represented by Scott Jackson and Steven Johnson, has agreed to purchase the vacant space and change it into a professional office space called the Fiesta corporate campus, Mayor John Giles announced March 15.

"The company made offers on other parts of the mall itself," he added. "They'll most likely acquire most of the mall over the next few years."

"This will be a live, work and play space," he said. "It's a concept that is starting to take hold in other places in the country where you have suburban malls that have lived out its usefulness."

The developers looked at the market within the Fiesta District, and saw a need for high-tech office space, Gary said.

The interior demolition of the vacant space will begin within the next two weeks, Gary said.

Macy's closed its Fiesta Mall location in early 2014, according to a statement released by the city of Mesa.

Construction is scheduled to begin in the fall of 2015, the statement said. Under Fiesta District design guidelines, the exterior of the building will be modernized and a 2,500-square-foot patio will be added to the upper-level area for employees.

Southern Avenue streetscape

In order to revitalize the district, streetscape improvements were necessary along Southern Avenue, Arrollado said.

Improvements began in June 2013 for the first phase, narrowing Southern Avenue, making the sidewalks wider, adding street amenities and putting new landscape marks, Arrollado said.

The construction, which ended in January, affected businesses, Arrollado said, but public

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meetings at the kick-off and biweekly stakeholder meetings mitigated the issue. Monthly construction updates were also sent via email to property owners.

The business owners "thought that the construction would create traffic jams, but they've changed their minds," Kavanaugh said.

Several welcome signs for the district and city have been installed, located at the west and east entrances, Kavanaugh said.

Mesa Community College installed banners to celebrate its 50th anniversary.

"In cooperation with the city, this is the first time that we've been able to get banners placed in the Fiesta District," said Jeffrey Darbut, vice president of administrative services at MCC.

The first phase's improvements along Southern Avenue cost \$10.5 million, Arrollado said. About \$7.9 million came from the 2008 general obligation bond project. A portion of the street tax from 2008 was used in the first phase, Arrollado said.

The second phase expands construction from the Tempe canal to Sycamore Drive along Southern Avenue.

New wider sidewalks, landscaping, curbs, benches, street lights, pedestrian lights, trash cans, bike racks and traffic signals will be installed during the second phase, according to the city of Mesa website. Colored paving is to be installed at the intersections of Southern Avenue and Dobson Road, and Southern Avenue and San Jose Circle.

The second phase of construction will cost \$12.5 million, Arrollado said.

Stakeholders

Major stakeholders in the Fiesta District are helping to implement the area's design.

"We worked with major property owners like Banner Desert and Mesa Community College on their construction where they started to change the load and feel of their campuses," Kavanaugh said.

Mesa Community College is the largest community college within Maricopa County, with 22,000 students, Darbut said.

MCC opened its performing arts center, which will "contribute to the vitality" of the Fiesta District, Darbut said. The new center, which cost \$18 million, opened last October. It seats 450.

In addition, a new art gallery, a \$2 million facility, and a new enrollment center and student lounge, \$17 million projects, also recently opened at MCC.

"We're continuing to make improvements on our campus which will fit in nicely with the design of the Fiesta District," Darbut said.

The new facilities "are major people-generators for the area and they usually become more visible," Kavanaugh said. "A lot of people don't know this, but the rose garden at MCC has also gotten attention. On Trip Advisor, it's one of the most visited attractions in Mesa."

Other large stakeholders in the area are in the hospitality industry, Kavanaugh said.

"Many of the hotels have undergone major renovations and have been booking all their rooms," he said.

Dobson Ranch, south of the Fiesta District, is also a large stakeholder.

"They've been involved majorly in early investments," Kavanaugh said. "They've given input on how you can update a facility and not make sacrifices to make it more attractive."

Developers and the future



Developers looking at the Fiesta District are visionaries who can see the potential in the city, Gary said.

"I've always seen the (Fiesta District) as a promising area because of how it is situated at the crossroads of major roads," Gary said. "I've said this to (the developers) for a number of years that it is a little bit of a diamond in the rough right now, but if you look at where it is situated in the Southeast Valley, situated in the transportation corridor and situated because of the labor pool, it can really be a thriving employment center."

Developers must look past the traditional aspect of employment and see it as more of a mixed and different use, she said.

Kavanaugh believes that the district will be at its peak, economically, when older buildings in the area begin to be redeveloped. Several vacant shopping centers in the area are the "biggest eyesores" in the district, he said.

"When those get reborn, it's going to be symbolic of the vibrant district in the city," Kavanaugh said.

• *Jenny Ung is a sophomore at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University. She is interning this semester for the AFN.*

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