

Nut Tree continues to evolve

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VACAVILLE - The Nut Tree Village is still a work in progress.

That's how Westrust representatives have described the premier retail center, which will see businesses such as The Elephant Bar restaurant and the Huntington Learning Center open their doors this year.

It also means renovations for the Nut Tree Market Pavilion and Bocce Grove to make these places more customer-friendly.

'In the long term, we want to meet the interests of the community, create a special place made up of special tenants,' said Sean Whiskeman, managing director of leasing and marketing for Westrust. 'We have gone a great distance to market to unique tenants that are not in the community.'

That runs the gamut from retailers such as Borders and Fenton's Creamery to non-retail businesses such as the Huntington Learning Center.

Whiskeman said the most exciting parts of Nut Tree are going to be in the buildings surrounding the Bocce Grove, where the center has most of its vacancies and future tenants who are in the planning stages of opening businesses.

One is an upscale, full-service Thai restaurant that will be taking 2,500 square feet next to Amici's East Coast Pizzeria.

Once finished, Nut Tree will have what Whiskeman calls a gathering of restaurants that cater to a range of needs from the quick service offered by small places such as Jamba Juice to full-service establishments such as The Elephant Bar, whose site is now being graded.

'It will really be unmatched in the corridor,' Whiskeman said.

Westrust readjusted Nut Tree's direction earlier this year when it approached the city to ask for more freedom in what businesses it can bring into the retail center. Westrust wants to consider banks, health and beauty services, children's learning centers, adult educational facilities, optometry services and medical offices.

Vacaville City Council members were concerned these would dilute the retail-oriented vision of the Nut Tree and damage the shopping center's regional reputation.

City leaders agree that times have been difficult for Nut Tree's developers and they want to work with them to bring in more quality businesses.

'We want the Nut Tree to be a success and we will do what we can to facilitate that,' Vacaville Assistant City Manager Laura Kuhn said.

The first such new business to enter Nut Tree Village in the wake of the City Council's approval is the Huntington Learning Center which is leasing 2,000 square feet of space there.

Huntington, based in Oradell, N.J., has been in business since 1977 and has more than 300 centers in 40 states that provide tutoring for students from elementary to high school.

Local businessman Craig Lash is opening a Huntington franchise in the Nut Tree because 'I could not think of a better choice than Nut Tree.'

'You could not ask for better visibility,' Lash said of the location within sight of Interstate 80.

Lash plans to open the center in two months with a small staff that will grow as the center builds enrollment.

Earlier this month, Nut Tree's developers announced that the Market Pavilion and Bocce Grove will undergo a \$1.5 million renovation to make the areas more accessible to patrons and user-friendly for tenants.

The renovation centers on the 10,000-square-foot Market Pavilion and will allow tenants to have exterior storefronts, highly visible entrances and outdoor seating areas to accommodate patrons of the various restaurants.

The move was made to stimulate more foot traffic that would make it easier for the tenants there to stay in business.

Nut Tree's Bocce Grove will also get a makeover to recreate more of the original Nut Tree atmosphere. This includes taking out four of the eight bocce courts to make way for an outdoor fire pit for public gatherings, a central plaza featuring a stage for community activities and 12 benches.

Two family-oriented playground areas featuring interactive, animal-shaped climbing toys and other fun activities for children will be constructed.

There are still plans to put a hotel and conference center at the Nut Tree, but Vacaville is still looking for a developer to build it.

Last fall, Nut Tree developer Roger Snell backed off from plans to build a hotel and conference center, saying the project was not economically feasible due to the change in market conditions.

The hotel and conference center remain a major goal for the City Council, and city officials are in talks with at least one potential hotel developer.

'We are hanging in there,' Kuhn said. 'The market being what it is, we are looking at all our options and coming up with a game plan.'

While not part of the Nut Tree itself, Travis Credit Union Park may be destined for the bulldozer once the city and the ballpark's owner reach an agreement on the land's future use.

The ballpark, which is now in the hands of CT Realty Corp., closed in early 2007 after five years of financial losses.

CT Realty Corp. has been in talks with the city for some time, and the City Council received a briefing on the ballpark's status in a closed session earlier this month

No action has been taken yet, according to Vacaville City Manager David Van Kirk.

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