

Nut Tree moving forward

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A large excavator marks the area of what will be the new Nut Tree Plaza, a project that will be completed as early as August.

City leaders, tenants and the developer Westrust gathered together Wednesday afternoon for the groundbreaking ceremony to welcome a new vision for the complex that seemed to be ailing from the start.

"We're here to make the project right, so we're moving forward with new plans," said Rick Capretta, co-managing partner of Westrust -- the developer that built the 30-acre Nut Tree Village at the entrance to the Family Park. "The Master Plan wasn't well-integrated. Now we have the opportunity for open dialogue between the parties. This is all going to be one instead of separate islands."

Next week, the city and Westrust plan to finish the acquisition that will transfer the responsibility of the Family Park from Nut Tree Associates to Westrust.

Just a few of the Nut Tree Plaza changes include moving the No. 5 Nut Tree train to travel around the oval spot between the businesses and moving the carousel to the front of the plaza.

"It will be more closely to what was originally intended," said Capretta, adding that not having the attractions at the front of the property is one reason the Family Park failed. "The lighting in the trees and on the carousel will definitely attract the passengers on I-80."

According to Capretta, some 66 million passengers travel down Interstate 80 each year.

Capretta said the Harbison House, which was originally moved to the center of the Family Park by Westrust, will not be forgotten.

He hopes to create an atmosphere that will incorporate the Historic Harbison House and the Nut Tree airport.

A new idea that Capretta hopes to bring to reality is to create a kiosk in the picnic area, allowing customers to order food from any of the restaurants in the immediate area and have it delivered to the plaza.

Vacaville Mayor Len Augustine is excited about the changes.

"This is a renewal to the original commitment," he said.

Capretta noted that Westrust has been involved with the Nut Tree development for more than five years and the company is ready to invest in another three to four years until the plaza is completed.

"We have quality tenants in this place and there is a lot of activity," Augustine continued. "You can't deny that it's in a great location."

He admitted that Vacaville can't create the old Nut Tree because, after all, it failed.

However, the new Nut Tree has played a significant part in why Vacaville has remained solvent during a rough economy.

Finance Director Ken Campo agreed and said a sizable portion of the city's sales tax revenues have come from the large anchor stores at the shopping center.

Still, longtime Vacaville residents are glad that some of the key elements from the original Nut Tree will be included in the new plaza.

Councilwoman Dilenna Harris worked at Nut Tree. Harris said she would ride the train to the airport, greet visitors and escort them back to Nut Tree for meetings.

"For those of us who have lived here for a long time, there are elements that are special," she said and recalled the cookies that used to be made there.

She also explained that having some parts of the Nut Tree will really incorporate the family-friendly atmosphere that Vacaville already has.

Harris added that she's hoping to see the train make it out to the airport again.

"Access to the airport would be a major boost to this community," she said. "It would become a destination."