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Gardens rising from the debris

Buildings are beginning to sprout in old Buckingham Square

By **Boyd Fletcher**
The Aurora Sentinel

AURORA | The chorus of reverse beeps and rumbling diesel engines from the pack of earth movers at the site of the former Buckingham Square Mall is music to Molly Markert's ears.



Construction at Havana Gardens is shown Aug. 25 near South Havana Street and East Mississippi Avenue in Aurora. Dick's Sporting Goods and Petsmart are planning to move into the development once it is complete. (Heather A. Longway/The Aurora Sentinel)

"It is so exciting for me," she said. "I can see it, and it's like - now I get it."

The transformation from Buckingham to the \$100-million retail and residential Havana Gardens project is under way, with six structures and a city's worth of roads and sidewalks currently being constructed in what used to be a Mervyn's and its surrounding parking lot.

Four of the buildings, now shrouded in yellow insulation, will be part of the entrance to the shopping center, dubbed Garden Avenue. The esplanade will run east to west through the center of the project and feature a rose garden and large sundial, according to the developers with Miller

Weingarten.

Markert said just having those structures up gives her a better idea of what she and council gave approval to nearly two years ago.

"It's nice because you can see it in front of you and not as a concept," she said.

And along with the growth of development on the site comes a growing anticipation for the shops and stores that will fill it.

Dick's Sporting Goods and Petsmart are all planning to move into the development. Staples, which had originally planned to be in an anchor spot, has pulled out of the project.

Clark Walker, developer with Miller Weingarten, said he expects smaller and more unique, mom-and-pop businesses to express more interest in the project once construction is under way.

Walker said the project is on time to open with the first tenants by the first quarter of next year.

But Markert says she is already hearing from friends and members of her constituency who are ready to get some shopping done.

"The best part is when somebody's eyes light up and they say, 'Kohl's is going to be there? When?'" she said. "And those shopping dollars turn into tax revenue for

the city."

The development will include 50 acres of stores and restaurants and an additional 10 acres of 45 apartment buildings and 12 town houses, according to development plans.

Developers have said the townhouses will be put on sale for between \$200,000 and \$250,000, and the apartments will sit above the storefronts. There are also plans for 230 apartments on the east side of the site, said

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Chris Gillies, senior vice president of Legacy Partners, the company handling The Gardens' residential component.

Markert said the city was able to give final approval for blighting the property Aug. 25, which she said opens up room for more city funding to come to the project.

A resolution related to the Buckingham property officially declared the land to be blighted, making it eligible for urban renewal improvements. According to the state's revised statutes, any urban renewal authority must present evidence at a public hearing that a property is blighted before undertaking urban renewal improvements.

The move perpetuates a process that began several months ago with the formation of a special, tax-increment-financing district initially approved by the city, Arapahoe County and the Cherry Creek Schools District.

In a study conducted by the city, five factors of blight have been attributed to the land, including failing structures, inadequate public improvements or utilities and environmental contamination of buildings or property.

However, that move was expected and because Miller Weingarten has already broken ground on the new mixed-use shopping center on South Havana Street between East Florida and East Mississippi avenues, the move was procedural.



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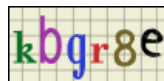
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