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Changing of the guard

Spectators, legislators and developers begin deconstruction of old mall in Aurora

By J.C. O'Connell
The Aurora Sentinel

The claws of a construction equipment operated by Mayor Ed Tauer tore into the outline of an 'M' Jan. 8, bringing down the shadow of an old sign on an Aurora landmark's façade.

The demolition of **Buckingham Square Mall** had officially begun.

"You know when you're walking along uphill for a long time, and you just peak up over the hill and you see everything open up on the other side, that's what it felt like," said Tauer, after climbing down from the demolition equipment. "I know it sounds like a cliché but it's like the start of something that you've been working on for so long and so many people have been working on and today's the day you get to actually see it happen. All that work, all that pulling, today's the day it starts to pay off."

Developer Miller Weingarten has worked with the city and neighbors over the past year to create a redevelopment plan for the dated and shuttered shopping center.

The development, which will replace Buckingham, dubbed The Gardens on Havana, will include 50 acres of stores and restaurants and an additional 10 acres of apartment buildings and town houses, according to development plans.

"We're very confident that this project is going to be strengthening the surrounding area and providing the neighbors with some new amenities as well as new neighbors," said Clark Walker, the project's development manager.

The demolition could be complete as early as March with construction starting in April and stores opening next year, Walker said.

Plans for The Gardens include big box stores such as Home Depot and the existing Target and a main-street style avenue with smaller shops at street level and residential units on top.

The Target will remain unchanged, but space is being left in case the store decides to expand to a Super Target in the future.

Home Depot, Dick's Sporting Goods, and PetSmart are all planning to move into the development, but Staples has since pulled out of the project.



Heather A. Longway-Burke/The Aurora Sentinel City Council woman Molly Markert steps off the excavator, with help from Jim Gochis of Alpine Demolition, after helping demolish some of the Buckingham Square Mall Jan. 8 during the demolition ceremony of the Buckingham Square Mall.



Heather A. Longway-Burke/The Aurora Sentinel The remains of a former Mervyn's department store are shown through broken glass Jan. 8 after the demolition ceremony of the Buckingham Square Mall.

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The development's center, Garden Avenue, will run east to west through the center of the project and feature a rose garden and large sundial, according to the developers.

"We're going to have an extraordinary new development here," said City Manager Ron Miller.

Developers are hoping that smaller, and more unique, mom-and-pop businesses will become interested in the project once construction is under way.

The project will include 12 townhouses, which will list for between \$200,000 and \$250,000, about 45 apartments above stores and another approximately 230 apartments on the east side of the site.

The crowd of neighbors and city leaders attending the demolition event cheered as Councilwoman Molly Markert took a turn behind the demolition equipment controls, further destroying the old Meryyn's sign and exposing the building's pink insulation and metal framing.

"Aurora's always known for growing and now we get to be known for re-growing," said Councilwoman Molly Markert, who represents the area.

Business leaders said they were also happy to see Buckingham go.

"I think it's great for this whole area to see this redevelopment come and add a new chapter to the neighborhood's life," said Kevin Hougen, president of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce.

Local lawmakers have gone so far as to call the outdated shopping mall a "pimple" on the face of the city, but when it opened in 1971 Buckingham was a gathering place in Aurora.

Many residents have fond memories of the mall in better days, when it opened in 1971 and quickly became a bustling center of activity.

James Quirk, went to Buckingham every weekend with his parents while growing up in Aurora and had his high school wood shop projects displayed in the mall's courtyard.

"I think it's kind of sad, but on the other hand in order to save Buckingham they would have had to do something a decade ago," said Quirk, who began taking pictures of the mostly empty mall three years ago. "At least they're not letting it sit here and fall apart all by itself."

And at least one nostalgic shopper has posted a photo tribute of Buckingham on YouTube.

Beth Misantoni, who shopped at Buckingham for more than 20 years, said she'd like to have a piece of the Dillard's rock façade.

"I want a piece, you know, the memory," she said.

Developers said they're determined to create a sense of place and give shoppers and residents a unique experience by including a garden theme throughout The Gardens.

In addition to a rose garden, there are plans for a water garden, a boulevard garden, a promenade garden and decorative trestles to support landscaping throughout the development.

Miller Weingarten's other recent projects include Aurora City Place at East Alameda Avenue and Interstate 225, the Lowry Town Center and the Englewood City Center where the company's offices are located.

The redevelopment is expected to cost \$110 million.

Last year, the Aurora Urban Renewal Authority voted to make **Buckingham Square Mall** an urban renewal district, paving the way for \$12 million in taxes to support redevelopment effort.

The finding of blight clears the way for tax breaks.

Aurora will contribute the largest portion of the tax incentive - \$7 million - with Cherry Creek School District and Arapahoe County kicking in the rest.

The plan would essentially freeze the level of taxes the school district, city and county receive from Buckingham for the next 15 years.



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While the property's value increases, the taxes would not, allowing the developer to keep enough revenue to make the project financially feasible.

Miller Weingarten's plans also call for upgrading the bus stations surrounding Buckingham with decorative trestles.

The developer also plans to line Havana with plant life and 10-foot-wide sidewalks.

Before demolition began, the redevelopment ran into complications.

Miller Weingarten is abating asbestos in the old Dillard's building, a problem the company didn't know existed when purchasing the property.

Standing between the Dillard's building and the former site of Mervyn's, Arnie Schultz, president of Neighborhood Organizations Along Havana, said he'd been watching the demolition that morning.

"It's not so much about it coming down and the old thing being gone, but it's about the new," Schultz said. "It's good."

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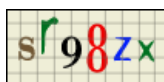
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