



Developer to pump millions into Barstow Mall

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“When Kmart left and some of the others left, it just killed the mall.”

Robin Grove, owner of Robin’s Music

BARSTOW — Gathered around the front end of a car with its hood popped, Mike Ballestracci and his employees at B&D Automotive reminisced about what the Barstow Mall used to be. It used to have a toy store, a book store, a Kmart and Sears.

“This place was happening back in the day,” said Ballestracci, whose auto repair shop occupies the old Kmart auto service center at the Barstow Mall. “This place was really rocking.”

The Kmart moved out of the mall nearly 15 years ago and several of the stores followed it. Since, businesses have moved in, some have survived, some have struggled, and some have left. The mall, for the most part, is empty, but a San Jose development company wants to change that.

On Monday, the Barstow Planning Commission unanimously approved a development permit for TT Group, who bought the mall in July 2006, to begin a multi-million dollar remodel of the mall. Stewert Fahmy, a representative from the developer, said the company plans to invest \$2.5 to \$5 million to tear down portions of East Main Street property, construct a new building and food court, bring in new retail shops and erect a unique sign to attract visitors from Interstate 40 and Interstate 15.

“It’s a huge risk we’re taking but we believe it can be done,” Fahmy said at the meeting. “Our hope and our goal is to get as many retail tenants as possible.”

No new stores have signed onto the project, and the development firm is talking to any retailer that will listen, Fahmy said. He said the TT Group, which has developed properties across California and some internationally, bought the mall because of its

location between two highly traveled interstates. It will be the group's first mall development.

The plans include tearing down the entrance to the mall where the Kmart used to be. The portion will be replaced with a circular building and a dome and will serve as a food court. The interior and exterior of the remain mall will be updated, and the developer and architect Peter Ko hope to power the building with solar panels. Fahmy hopes the alternative energy facet of the plan will attract vendors.

Also key to the design, Fahmy said, is the mall's new sign. Current plans call for a circular sign about 80 feet off the ground with arching letters and an illuminated globe on top. The sign, as planned, does not fit with the city's sign regulations, and the Commission will consider the sign at a meeting in October.

Ballestracci, who watched the Planning Commission meeting on television after reading about it in the Desert Dispatch, said he thinks the group's plans will help the mall attract new retailers and increase the customer traffic. However, he worries that it will mean that his business will have to move to the back of the mall. Ballestracci and other owners of businesses in the mall said that the developer had not yet talked to them about the plans and their futures inside the mall. Rick Pennington, owner of Phantom Sports, said he has not been approached by the developer but would like to stay in the mall if possible.

The developer's plans excited some of the shoppers who trickled into the mall on Tuesday. The Avila family stopped by the mall to do some back-to-school shopping. Gilberto, 10, and his sister Lesly, 5, said they would like to see more shops open in the mall. Gilberto said that sometimes they have to shop out of town to buy clothes.

Ballestracci is cautiously optimistic. He said since he has been at the mall, three owners have cycled through each with plans to revitalize the property. However, no plan before, he said, has made it as far as the Planning Commission.

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