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Groundbreaking Gets Shopping Center Under Way

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Finally.

After more than a year of bureaucratic wrangling, permitting problems and economically motivated delays, officials are slated to officially break ground today on the controversial Unser Crossing shopping center.

“We are absolutely thrilled to finally have this groundbreaking take place,” said Klarissa Peña, president of the South West Alliance of Neighbors. “It has taken awhile, but this is a totally positive thing. We have a wonderful group of people who are committed to revitalizing West Central. We're doing what's good for the community, and that's exciting.”

City workers already have begun installing street lights, sidewalks and other infrastructure near the intersection of Central and Unser SW — where the development is expected to be finished around this time next year.

Today's groundbreaking signifies the beginning of a process that will bring Lowe's, Defined Fitness, Staples and CVS Pharmacy to West Central.

City Councilor Ken Sanchez, who was a vocal proponent of Unser Crossing since the project's inception, said commercial real estate agents have been out trying to drum up more tenants for the development. But because of the state of the economy, no other businesses have yet signed on, he said.

Still, the councilor said seeing heavy equipment at the site and a firm date for groundbreaking on paper has improved his enthusiasm for the project.

“This development will be a tremendous asset to the entire community, and it looks like it's finally going to happen,” Sanchez said.

Delays, zoning changes

There have been times when it appeared Unser Crossing would never see the light of day.

The project had been delayed by an argument over controversial incentives before the City Council. Armstrong Development Properties Inc. had threatened to move the project elsewhere if the project did not have its impact fees — worth \$1.8 million — waived. Some councilors argued that, although they believed in the development, they couldn't justify blighting the vacant land. The land would have had to be designated as blighted for the project to qualify for the dropped impact fees, which a developer normally pays for infrastructure and

other improvements in an area it plans to build on.

In the end, councilors agreed to pay for \$1.8 million in infrastructure on city land. The developer must still pay the impact fees.

That was not the end, however, for Unser Crossing.

The City Council's Land Use Planning and Zoning Committee, or LUPZ, voted unanimously in August to change the zoning on the property where the shopping center will sit from residential to commercial.

The project, which Armstrong Development had predicted would break ground in early March, ran into problems during its permitting process with city planning and fire officials — causing the delay, Armstrong director S.G. Ellison said.

The permits were finalized a few weeks ago, and now the development has the green light.

Breath of fresh air

Unser Crossing will be the commercial component of what elected officials and neighborhood leaders hope will be a breath of fresh air for West Central.

Plans also are in the works for a fire station, a charter school, a library and a University of New Mexico Hospital medical center in the area.

“This is a very exciting time for us,” Peña said. “Some of the things that are happening now are things we've been working on for years.”

Peña dismisses the controversy around Unser Crossing as having come from “outside factions, people who do not live in or represent the area.”

Despite the enthusiasm, Southwest Mesa residents will still have to hold on for another year.

Construction of the infrastructure should take about nine months, and tenants will have to wait for its completion before the actual stores can be built, Ellison told the Journal in April. The size of the project is the reason for the nine months to complete the infrastructure, Ellison said.

“It's 50 acres, so it's quite a large endeavor,” he said at the time.
