

Major expansion proposed for Mission Valley mall

Westfield files plan for condos, offices in 'village'

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UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITERS

August 6, 2008

Westfield Mission Valley mall, which opened the same year John F. Kennedy became president and The Supremes signed with Motown Records, is headed for a 21st-century remake.

The Australia-based owner of the mall, which sprawls along Interstate 8 on a 60-acre site, yesterday filed an application with the city of San Diego to create the same kind of “walkable village” it envisions for its Westfield University Towne Center mall.

Westfield Corp.'s \$900 million UTC project received City Council approval last week, seven years after the first application was filed and after a sometimes fractious battle with critics who fear the project will lead to more traffic congestion and noise.

The proposed renovation in Mission Valley, which calls for an additional 500,000 square feet of retail space on two levels as well as new office space and residential units, is likely to face similar challenges.

Lynn Mulholland, chairwoman of the Mission Valley Community Council, criticized the proposal as a “further assault” that will increase traffic, water runoff and air quality.

Some supporters greeted the project as the wave of the future.

“Westfield is doing exactly the right thing,” said Gary London, president of The London Group, a San Diego-based real estate and land-use consulting company. “It’s taking outdated shopping malls and making mixed-use activity centers, creating tremendous efficiencies for how we live, shop, work and recreate.”

The project, which is expected to cost several hundreds of millions of dollars, includes:

- 500,000 square feet of new retail space devoted mostly to small shops, specialty boutiques and restaurants. The center now has 1.3 million square feet of retail space, which includes three large department stores and a 20-screen AMC Theatres.
- 50,000 square feet of office space or a hotel.
- 250 condominiums, with 10 percent of them reserved as affordable.
- Several parking structures.

Westfield officials said it is too early to provide much detail, but that, as with the UTC renovation, they are committed to incorporating “green” initiatives to its Mission Valley plan.

Mission Valley Center opened in 1961 and was San Diego's first major regional shopping center, patronized by consumers happy about the variety of stores, free parking and freeway access.

The valley quickly transformed from a land of cow pastures and dairies into an urban mishmash of auto dealerships, hotels, office buildings, movie theaters and residential developments – and the inevitable traffic jams, particularly at rush hour and during the holidays.

Joe Yetter, a retail leasing agent at Grubb & Ellis Co., said Westfield might succeed in boosting its profit margin by including a boutique fitness facility, an upscale grocery and national chains that are not represented locally.

“With office, retail, residential and hotel, you're building your own little stable village atmosphere that lends it more character and style,” Yetter said.

But as with UTC, approval for the Mission Valley project, if it comes, is likely to be a drawn-out affair.

The Mission Valley Unified Planning Committee, which will receive a briefing on Westfield's expansion at noon today at the Mission Valley Library, has been raising concerns lately about a long list of proposed projects.

One of the biggest, the 230-acre, 4,780-home Quarry Falls development at the north end of Qualcomm Way, is on the Planning Commission's agenda tomorrow with City Council action expected this fall.

“I'm speechless,” said committee chairwoman Linda Kaufman. “I honestly don't know what to say about all the projects. They're all just lining up.”

Kaufman said the Westfield application makes it all the more important to update the 1985 community plan first and adopt a list of infrastructure needs, from traffic improvements to fire stations.

“That would be ideal,” she said.

The shopping center originally was developed by the May Co. department store chain and acquired by Westfield in 1994. It has been remodeled several times, most recently in 1995 when the AMC complex opened.

Jonathan Bradhurst, Westfield's senior vice president for U.S. development, said the proposed project is a “smart growth” opportunity.

“These acres and acres of black asphalt parking, the big open parking fields, are clearly inappropriate today in terms of preserving resources,” Bradhurst said. “We're building up instead of out. We want to take it from where it is today – a car-oriented, 1960s-era shopping mall – and create a pedestrian-oriented, walkable shopping, entertainment and lifestyle experience.”

Given the likely time lag between initial application, approval and construction, Westfield also is banking that the renovated mall will make its debut in a kinder economic climate, London said.

“This application is not a reflection of current demand because, given the economy, retail expenditures at these shopping centers are most certainly down,” London said. “But these things have a five-to 10-year development horizon, at which point there will be a whole new set of market conditions.”

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