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Mall overhaul begins

CODDINGTOWN IN SR New building to house Whole Foods Market is first step in renovation

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Demolition crews began tearing down the former Ralph's supermarket building at Coddington Mall this week to make way for a Whole Foods Market scheduled to open next spring.

A crane with powerful jaws began ripping through the concrete wall facing Range Avenue on Monday, opening a gaping hole that crews will expand until the building is reduced to rubble.

Replacing it will be a 49,000-square-foot modern market with a bold, swooping roofline and attractive brick and wood facade.

The project is the first phase of the long-promised multimillion-dollar renovation of the aging center, built by Hugh Coddington in 1962.

Demolition is expected to take about three weeks, and construction of a new shell should take six months, said Devon Foster, Coddington marketing manager. Whole Foods is expected to take another six months to get the store open by late spring or early summer 2009, Foster said.

Simon Property Group, which purchased a 50 percent stake in the mall in 2005, hopes to increase traffic to the mall by attracting new national tenants while maintaining a mix of locally owned businesses, Foster said.

Many tenants are excited that upgrades have finally begun after more than two years of discussions.

"They're happy to see the renovations and happy to see new retailers coming in," Foster said.

Simon hopes the Whole Foods Market and other upgrades create a domino effect that draws in new national tenants and triggers additional remodeling.

Currently, the only plans beyond Whole Foods involve upgrading the "look and feel" of

the mall's interior, leveling the floor and adding a food court near Gottschalks, Foster said. Details and timetables for those upgrades have not been released.

Not everyone is looking forward to the changes.

Many worry that upgrades will cause the mall to raise rents, driving out the local businesses that have supported Coddington for years.

Nancy Elgort, owner of ScrapAttack, this week closed the scrapbook supply store she's run at the mall for 11 years, citing higher maintenance fees Simon has charged since taking over.

"The last two years have been a huge struggle for a lot of the independents there," she said, citing a 30 percent increase in what is known as CAM, or common area maintenance fees.

As business slumped, Elgort said she asked the mall's owners for rent reductions but was ignored.

Simon has also been frustratingly vague about when upgrades would begin, how extensive they will be, and how businesses will be impacted during construction, Elgort said.

Other businesses, however, are more optimistic. They see renovations as long overdue and welcome.

"This mall needs to be rebuilt," said Nasser Omar, owner of Gianni men's clothing store and Leather & Luggage Park. "It's time for a change."

A lengthy period of renovations may hurt some businesses, but those that stick it out will be happy they did, he predicted.

"Some people are going to be hurt, yes, but in the long run, things are going to get better," Omar said.

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