

HB Independent

Huntington Beach's Pacific City complex aims to draw locals, tourists

By Roger Vincent

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The developers of a \$135-million shopping center near the famed Huntington Beach Pier face an unusual challenge — how to embrace the city's proud identity as Surf City without descending into surfing kitsch.

Sure, they hope to attract tourists in town to take in the beach scene, but the builders also want Orange County locals to feel comfortable at the Pacific City shopping and dining complex under construction on Pacific Coast Highway.

Signs made of surfboards, woodies parked by the valet stand and large surfing movie posters in the parking garage were considered and rejected, said Linda Berman, executive project director for developer DJM Capital Partners.

Figuring out how to communicate to visitors that they are in the "Surfing Capital of the World" without relying on cliched props has proved daunting.

"Surf culture is more attitudinal than it is aesthetic," she said. "You run out of imagery pretty quickly."

So the developers are trying to give Pacific City a laid-back beach house vibe by using natural materials such as wood and stone, accented with drought-resistant plants.

Locals will judge for themselves whether DJM hit the right notes when 11-acre Pacific City opens in summer 2015.

Work on the mall's two-level parking garage is well underway, and construction of the retail portion is scheduled to begin shortly.

The design aesthetic for Pacific City envisioned by architects Jerde Partnership and SMS Architects is a modern, craftsman-influenced beach bungalow. Restaurants there will have outdoor patio dining with ocean views.

Movies — some of them surf related — will be shown on an outdoor screen. The design will include what DJM calls "hang out" spaces intended to encourage people to stroll and congregate.

Pacific City will also house a public market called Lot 579 in the model of the bustling Ferry Building Marketplace in San Francisco. Named after nearby lifeguard towers on the beach, Lot 579 will sell produce, prepared food and retail products.

The market is intended to be an incubator for local artisans launching businesses. Established local firms will operate restaurants and businesses in the mall along with some well-known national tenants, said D.

John Miller, chief executive of DJM.

He declined to identify tenants that have agreed to be part of Pacific City except for Equinox, an upscale fitness center chain.

DJM, based in San Jose, previously took over and upgraded Huntington Beach called Bella Terra, which gave it a leg up with the city when it came to taking over Pacific City, Miller said. The Pacific City site was an eyesore for years after another developer prepared the land for construction but failed to get work underway.

DJM bought the land out of bankruptcy in 2012 and has successfully completed the city approval process, Miller said.

The site is also approved for a 250-room hotel, which will be developed separately by Irvine builder R. D. Olson Development, and 516 apartments that will be developed by Denver real estate investment trust UDR.

The waterfront is a prime location for a shopping center, said real estate broker Jeff Moore, head of retail services at CBRE Group Inc.

In this age of quick delivery of goods online, shoppers are looking for one of two things when they venture out of the house, he said: "value or experience."

With visitor experience in mind, many shopping centers, including Pacific City, are relying on restaurants to be their anchor tenants. The beach location adds appeal, Moore said.

"There is a demand for coastal living," he said. "People are moving there and they are affluent and they need a gathering place."

DJM's Berman thinks that if the mall appeals to locals, tourists will follow. The potential is vast, because more than 16 million people visit Huntington Beach each year, according to the city.

"We're at ground zero," she said. "The Huntington Beach Pier and the Pacific Ocean are unmistakable assets."

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