

\$18M Vineland downtown residential-retail project underway

Posted: Thursday, March 17, 2016 Thomas Barlas, Staff Writer

VINELAND — Demolition began this week to make room for what city officials said is one the biggest downtown development projects in recent years.

The estimated \$18 million Landis Square residential-retail complex also marks the second — and possibly last — of the Four Corners development projects originally planned to be built at the intersection of East Landis and East avenues.

Heavy equipment on Tuesday was smashing and tearing apart the old Travel Inn, a facility that local officials long considered an eyesore at an entrance to the city's downtown business district. The site, and other adjacent properties on which developer Hans Lampart said he expects to close in July, will house a three-story complex that includes about 75 residential units for senior citizens and veterans and retail stores.

The project still needs local Planning Board approval, said Lampart, who expects the work to be completed sometime around July 2017.

“This is a big project for Vineland,” Lampart said.

City officials, who gathered in the rain at the site Tuesday to watch the demolition begin, said Landis Square represents the largest downtown construction project since the Landis Theater reopened in 2010 and Landis MarketPlace opened in 2011.

“Ever think we'd see this day?” asked city Economic Development Director Sandy Forosisky.

City officials expect the project to spur additional downtown development, she said. The residential component also will place residents in a position to shop and walk on Landis Avenue, she said.

City Councilwoman Angela Calakos said Landis Square hopefully will help return Landis Avenue to the bustling district it was for decades. She called Landis Avenue “beautiful,” saying she wants to continue working to help it return to its glory days.”

“I'm very committed to that,” she said, adding that City Council can take pride in helping to make Landis Square a reality.

Mayor Ruben Bermudez last year vetoed an ordinance allocating \$1.9 million for the purchase and demolition of the Travel Inn and the former Adamo Feed Store for the Landis Square project. Bermudez's official explanation was that the move was “not in the best interest of the city.”

Council overrode the veto and stripped Bermudez of what the mayor contended was his governmental duty to oversee the project. Council took up that responsibility.

Landis Square's construction would mark only a 50 percent completion of the Four Corners project that was to turn the intersection of East Landis and East into a gateway to the downtown business district.

The only developed corner thus far contains the renovated Landis Theater and a restaurant named Mori's. The project cost \$10 million. Mori's is now closed, and the theater that opened in 2010 with a gala and pricey show featuring Bernadette Peters is open sporadically.

The city opted against developing the corner where the East Landis Hotel and Bar sits. City officials apparently weren't prepared to deal with the legal battle that a purchase attempt of the property could spur.

On the other corner is the former Sacred Heart High School. The original plans involved a significant expansion and upgrade of the school.