

Retail project gives Pacoima hope for recovery

By Kerry Cavanaugh, Staff Writer

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For more than a decade, the pile of rubble off Paxton Street has been an ugly reminder of Pacoima's troubles.

The site once was the proud location of the Price Pfister foundry, producing millions of faucets and keeping hundreds of workers in a comfortable middle-class lifestyle.

But in 1997 the company moved its operations to Mexico, taking some of the last good-paying manufacturing jobs in the area and leaving behind massive contamination.

Now, however, residents have renamed the land Pacoima Plaza and are hoping to reclaim at least some of the lost jobs - this time as cashiers, stockers and clerks in national big-box chain stores.

"This is something that was needed ever since Price Pfister left and took so many jobs away from the community," said Elizabeth Floyd, a longtime resident and member of the Mount Zion Baptist Church.

"This will build the self-esteem of the community. When there are jobs, it gives people something to get up and look forward to every day."

Next year, Primestor Development Inc. expects to break ground on a Costco, Best Buy and small retail complex on the former Price Pfister site. A Lowe's Home Improvement Warehouse is also being built in the 28-acre shopping center.

The complex will be the largest development in Pacoima in recent decades. And it represents a major infusion of public dollars to help revitalize the Northeast San Fernando Valley.

The federal government kicked in \$10.8 million to help with the environmental cleanup. The city's Community Redevelopment Agency recently approved \$9.9 million to help fund street and other infrastructure improvements, with final City Council approval expected in early August.

In exchange, city officials anticipate Plaza Pacoima will generate \$153 million in tax revenue over the next 30 years.

"This is the best project I've ever had the opportunity to work on," said Councilman Richard Alarcón, who also represented Pacoima in the late 1990s when the foundry closed.

Besides jobs, the center will bring the types of national retail chains that other communities take for granted.

"Now we don't have to travel across the Valley or

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to Burbank for quality goods," Alarcon said. "It's right in the neighborhood. Kids can say 'My neighborhood has a Best Buy, too.'"

Beyond retail

But there's more to Pacoima Plaza than stores, as the project has been a catalyst for community activism and empowerment on a scale rarely seen in Los Angeles.

Residents around the site originally organized to push for a thorough cleanup of the contamination left by Price Pfister. And once the cleanup was under way, community groups formed a new coalition to advocate for local amenities in the project.

For a year, representatives from 24 community groups, the neighborhood council, churches and schools met weekly to draft a community benefits agreement with the developer - which is required by the CRA when a project gets public subsidies.

The coalition sent out 15,000 fliers, held two community meetings attended by more than 250 people and surveyed some 234 people on what they most wanted for Pacoima.

Primestor and the community initially planned a retail center built around a plaza with a fountain and a cultural-arts-center storefront.

But the surveys and meetings showed the community overwhelmingly wanted jobs - good-paying jobs with benefits for people who lived

near the site.

"That changed the vision for the development pretty dramatically," said Josh Stehlik, supervising attorney at Neighborhood Legal Services.

And once Costco became a prospective tenant that would take up a good chunk of the property with its store and gas station, the plaza concept was no longer possible.

"The majority of people were willing to give up the plaza for the Costco because of the jobs it would bring," Stehlik said.

Indeed, Costco was lured to the site by Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and the store has been touted as the crown jewel of Pacoima Plaza because it pays salaries around \$15 an hour, plus benefits. That's what the average Price Pfister salary was in the late 1990s.

"It's important to see this property recycled into a use that serves the community," said Deputy Mayor Robert "Bud" Ovrom.

"Maybe it doesn't have as many jobs, but the jobs they have are good ones and people can shop locally."

Ultimately, the site will create 438 construction jobs and 354 permanent jobs, with a portion reserved for people who live within three miles of the store.

In addition, the coalition convinced the

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developer to prohibit check-cashing businesses and payday lenders in the project, and contribute \$300,000 to a cultural arts fund and support creation of a business improvement district.

Changing perception

Primestor co-founder and partner Arturo Sneider expects Pacoima Plaza will prompt more business interest in the area.

His Beverly Hills-based company specializes in developing retail projects in middle-income Latino communities that may be ignored by developers or national chains.

"It will change the perception of Pacoima for other retailers," Sneider said. "It will open people's eyes to a community that has been overlooked but is really a place with great opportunities."

He expects that redeveloping the long-vacant property will also ease the lingering anger over Price Pfister's departure.

"We really did want the community to move on beyond calling it the Price Pfister site. At some point the community said, 'Yeah, we need to move on.'"

Residents helped pick the Pacoima Plaza name, the modern architectural style of the complex and even gave input on the logo that will top the 80-foot freeway-adjacent Plaza Pacoima sign.

Pacoima Beautiful Executive Director Nury

Martinez grew up across the street from the Price Pfister site and helped negotiate the community benefits agreement.

"There's still a lot of resentment around Price Pfister and what they did," Martinez said. "I think this is going to be a complete transformation not only for the neighborhood right behind Plaza Pacoima, but for the entire Pacoima community."

Her mother, Julia Martinez, was an assembly-line worker laid off in 1996 and she still gets tears in her eyes when she talks about the plant closure.

She considers it one of the saddest moments in her life.

"I cried a lot for my job, day and night," she said.

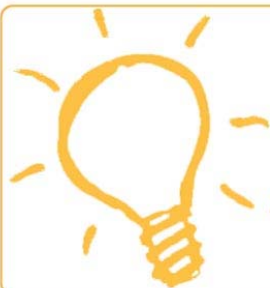
Workers launched a hunger strike and protests to convince the company to stay in Pacoima. Friends and co-workers lost their jobs and then lost their homes because they couldn't find comparable work.

Julia Martinez's front patio faces the Price Pfister site and the mountain of rubble is a constant reminder of those days.

Pacoima Plaza may bring more traffic and noise to her quiet street, but soon when she looks across the street, Martinez can think about shopping for plants for her garden at Lowe's instead of remembering her loss.

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