

First Rayzor wall erected: Development shows sign of progress on north side of University Drive – *Denton Record Chronicle, August 7, 2009, By Dawn Cobb / Staff Writer*

Concrete slabs, stacked one atop another, sit just out of sight of passersby at the U.S. Highway 380 and Interstate 35 interchange.

On Thursday, a crew of 10 used a crane to pull up the first walls of the \$1 billion, 410-acre Rayzor Ranch — a visible sign that the mixed-use development is closer to opening retail stores after years of anticipation by city officials and residents.



DRC/AI Key

The first wall is set in place Thursday morning at the Rayzor Ranch development on the north side of University Drive in Denton. Employees of EMJ Corp. are using tilt-wall technology to build the first structure on the retail site.

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That's good news to Linda Ratliff, who was driving down University Drive Thursday morning and saw the first wall.

"I am so happy that the walls are going up, because wherever I go the most asked question when people realize that I work for the city of Denton in economic development is, 'When's Rayzor Ranch going to open?' Now they can actually see what's happening now with walls going up," Ratliff said.

The site, once owned by the J. Newton Rayzor family, was long known for grazing longhorn cattle, a multi-story house on a hill and its history as a lookout site in the 1800s — before it was sold in April 2006. After a big announcement about the project, razing soon began, but by early 2008, internal changes among financial management and a slowing economy combined to delay construction.

Rayzor Ranch Marketplace, the half of the project north of U.S. 380, will be the first section built in the coming months.

In the next several days, two buildings with a combined 39,600 square feet will be up, with 80 percent of the space committed to tenants, said Charles Hodges, project manager for the development.

"The phone's ringing, now that everyone sees it is real and it's going to happen," said Hodges, who owns Hodges Development Services of Dallas.

Another 4,000-square-foot building has a 50-percent tenant commitment, and sites will soon be ready for First United and First State banks.

Jim Oldenkamp, superintendent with FoxCor of McKinney, stopped by the development Thursday morning to check on the project — a stop he has made several times a week for three to four months.

"We've been ready to start this bank for a while," Oldenkamp said of First United Bank, which plans to relocate from its existing University Drive location to Rayzor Ranch. "The bank has been waiting for something to happen."

Construction crews have been laying infrastructure on the north side of U.S. 380 in preparation for Rayzor Ranch Marketplace, which eventually will include a Sam's Club and Denton's second Wal-Mart. The two major tenants will fill an estimated 280,000 square feet, with construction expected to begin this fall, Hodges said. The north section will have a mix of restaurants, retail shops, banks and other services. Names of future tenants are expected to be announced in the coming months, officials said.

"We are excited we are under way," said Rex Paine, a principal with Austin-based Kingbridge Capital. Paine also is a partner in Torreon Capital, which owns Rayzor Ranch with Fortress as Allegiance Hillview L.P.

Road work is in the early stages along U.S. 380 from Bonnie Brae Street to I-35 — an estimated \$12 million project expected to be finished by the end of the year, Paine said. The work is about 20 percent complete.

"We've made a significant commitment of getting money out there and getting the road started," Paine said, adding that its early completion will help as the project continues to develop on the north and, later, south sides.

Rayzor Ranch Marketplace buildings will feature a limestone that project developers say will define the ranch-style look of the overall project. The stone, known as Leuders limestone, is similar to Austin stone, but denser and easier to work with, Hodges said.

The developers have been working with Denton County Museums to find photos depicting historic buildings in Denton County. Photos chosen include one from the Selz Cotton Gin in Pilot Point at the turn of the 20th century, a 1921 shot from inside Kennedy Saddle in downtown Denton and several other photos of the area around the Denton Square.

Four photos were selected from the Denton Record-Chronicle collection at the Denton County Museums, said Kim Cupit, curator of collections.

The photos will be etched onto the finished walls on buildings along U.S. 380, using a relatively new technique known as scanner murals. Each mural will be illuminated at night.

"I think it's a great way to incorporate history into the project," Cupit said.

Calling it a historical pictograph, Hodges said the idea was to pay tribute to the area's history.

From its conception, Rayzor Ranch has been proposed as a historic tribute to the region in its design and architectural structure, as well as its content. It is a concept the owners say they've always intended to follow.

"We're able to celebrate the community, and that's important," Hodges said.

As economic development director for the city of Denton, Ratliff has been working with the project since November 2005. In that time, she said, the owners' vision has rarely deviated from the original plans. Most of the changes sought by the company have dealt with signage or placement of buildings through an overlay plan.

"This is a project that is going to have a huge impact on our community," she said. "It is the biggest mixed-use development that I know of in North Texas at 410 acres."

From the start, Allegiance Hillview has set out to build a quality project, Ratliff said. "That's what they envisioned, and that's what they still envision."

Both Paine and Hodges said they sought flexibility from city planning officials on the first plans for Rayzor Ranch, to allow tenants to have some choices about size and location, adding that the original site plans were so specific that they locked them in.

"We need a framework for success — that's what we need," Paine said. "The other plan did not allow that."

Both said their intentions were to not lower the quality.

"We're going to build what we're intending to build," Paine said.

The overall project will be unique to Denton, Hodges said when asked if the mixed-use development was similar to other projects around the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

Plans for the south side of the project include medical businesses along Scripture Street, residential space along Bonnie Brae, a town center at U.S. 380 and I-35 and a park at the apex of the property. The park will be several feet higher than the rest of the site, offering a view of the surrounding area — from Krum to downtown Denton. A museum and other features remain part of the project plans, developers said.

The project has a commitment from Cook Children's Hospital, which purchased a 12-acre site, and several medical complexes are under way. For the residential area, developers are looking at several concepts, including townhomes and cottage-style homes.

The town center is proposed to include a mix of restaurants, retail shops and other similar businesses.

The sizable development is one of only a few under construction across the country, Paine said, adding that its location near several major transportation routes and continuing growth in Denton County make it an attractive project.

Rayzor Ranch is expected to draw people from 40 miles to the east and west and up to 75 miles from the north. "It truly is one of the few regional dominant sites," Paine said.

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