

After many years of waiting, work to start on San Elijo's Town Center

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Artist's rendering of the second phase of commercial construction slated to be built over the next year in San Elijo's Town Center. (courtesy Benson & Bohl Architects, Inc.)



Teri Figueroa Contact Reporter

After perhaps 15 years of waiting — and trying not to lose faith — San Elijo Hills residents will finally see restaurants and shops go up on vacant land in the commercial heart of the upscale community.

Grading is set to begin next week on a weedy, fenced-in patch of dirt in the middle of the sprawling master-planned development in southern San Marcos. Construction should start around October, and the first businesses could open by next spring on the 5 acres of vacant land in what is essentially downtown San Elijo.

“I know there has been skepticism. I hope to cure that in a few weeks as we start creating dust and showing people what a great project this is,” said Duncan Budinger, director of

retail development for Ambient Communities, which is building the project. “We fully believe we are going to meet or exceed the expectations of the community.”

Residents and the city of San Marcos have long demanded the completion of San Elijo Town Center, a retail hub expected to serve the thousands of homes. The median income within a one-mile radius of the Town Center site was nearly \$95,000 last year, according to the project developers.

The plan calls for 34,000 square feet of restaurants and retail, as well as 24 townhomes — three-story units with rooftop decks.

The project will be built in two phases, and should be done by the end of 2018.

The first phase of the commercial center will be on a roughly 2-acre square lot in the middle of where San Elijo Road splits into northbound and southbound sections. The Town Center will consist of four separate buildings with 11 total spaces for businesses. The layout includes several outdoor patios and seating areas. Three of those retail spots have already been leased.



Artist's rendering of a portion of the first phase of retail development to be built in San Elijo's Town Center over the next 12 months. (courtesy Benson & Bohl Architects, Inc.)

Budinger said he could not yet announce the names of the planned tenants, but they include a restaurant, a nationally known fitness spot and a service-type of business. Doors should be open by the middle of next summer.

The second phase will consist of about 11,000-square-feet of shops in a building on a slice of a triangular shaped island further up San Elijo Road, just behind the area's Visitor's Center.

The first dozen town homes will go up in Phase One on the lot right behind the Chevron gas station. The remaining dozen are part of Phase Two, and will go up on the triangular-shaped lot.

HomeFed, the publicly traded company that manages San Elijo Hills, has teamed with Ambient Communities to build the Town Center. Jeff O'Connor, director of operations for HomeFed, said last week that the development will include a few restaurants.

"We really tried to cater to what the residents want," O'Connor said.



Artist's rendering of townhomes to be built in San Elijo Town Center. (courtesy Benson & Bohl Architects, Inc.)

Earlier this month, when the developers put a construction trailer on the land and stakes in the ground, residents were thrilled by the signs of life. Among them was Councilman Chris Orlando, who has lived in San Elijo Hills for about 15 years.

“To have this finally coming, I think it’s something that most everyone in the community has been looking forward to,” Orlando said Friday. “It will be great to finally see the dirt turning and progress being made on it.”

Nicolas Jonville, a San Elijo Hills resident since 2002 and a real estate broker whose office is in the Town Center, was equally overjoyed. After recently spotting a bulldozer on the site, one of his real estate agents took a video and posted it online.

“I was like ‘Yay!’ The video got a bunch of likes. Everybody is excited,” Jonville said.

The development, he said, “has been long awaited and the excitement has been building up. And the emotion. A lot of people have lost faith.”

The community’s first commercial businesses — a grocery store, bank and gas station — opened on San Elijo Road around 2008. On the south side of the street, a strip of small businesses line the main road, with condos on top. Ambient bought those nine retail shops earlier this year.

The developers have said they’re confident the area has enough homes and pass-through traffic to support the new Town Center, especially as the main route becomes a more popular conduit between San Marcos and Carlsbad. Bundinger pointed to a traffic study from late 2016 indicating that there are more than 30,000 average daily vehicle trips on San Elijo Road.

The San Elijo Hills master plan calls for about 3,460 residential units, ranging from condominiums to large homes. Construction started in late 1998, and the vast majority are up and occupied. Only about 80 housing units — high end homes — remain to be built.