

Coming soon: Mid-City Market

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Rebecca Mowbray

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Plans are shaping up for a new shopping center in Mid-City anchored by Winn-Dixie that will erase a prominent pocket of blight and interact with the proposed Lafitte Greenway bicycle corridor.

Stirling Properties hopes to break ground in September on the \$25 million to \$35 million Mid-City Market at the site of the former Harry's Ace Hardware building on 301 N. Carrollton Ave. and the Bohn Ford building at 401 N. Carrollton Ave. Both properties are under contract.

"We're working through the process for permitting, finance and design," said **Townsend Underhill**, vice president of development for Stirling.

Stirling has signed a lease with Winn-Dixie Stores Inc. for a 53,000-square foot grocery, Underhill said. The Mid-City location will be modeled after the Winn-Dixie store on Louisiana 21 in Covington, which opened in February 2010 as a national prototype for the Jacksonville, Fla., company.

That store has stained concrete floors, high ceilings, soft lighting and a 30-foot open-air covered entryway with produce displayed farmers market-style in open boxes. The store also has a yogurt bar, olive bar, salad bar, wing bar, and a seafood case that's about twice the size of a regular store, as well as nuts and dried fruit sold by the pound.

The regional vice president for Winn-Dixie in the New Orleans area was traveling and couldn't be reached for comment about the plans.

The grocery store will be set at the back of the Bohn Ford site, and an additional 55,000 square feet of retail space will dot the rest of the property. Underhill said Stirling is negotiating with about a dozen additional retailers, but no other leases have been signed.

The latest version of the site plan names Office Depot, Petco, Verizon, Felipe's burrito, Pinkberry frozen yogurt, Five Guys burgers and fries, and Pei Wei Asian diner as possibilities.

Because the development is centrally located with good transportation access, Underhill said Stirling expects that the shopping center will draw patrons from the university area to Lakeview, and into the central part of the city. "There are a limited number of viable retail sites in Orleans Parish. This one is very centrally located, so it's got a wide draw," Underhill said.

Fusing site into bike path

One unique aspect of the project is that the proposed Lafitte Greenway, a 3-mile-long park that would connect Armstrong Park on the edge of the French Quarter to Canal Boulevard where Lakeview meets Mid-City, runs alongside the proposed Winn-Dixie and the main part of the site. Several retail sites in the new development will face the greenway.

Jennifer Farwell, president of the Mid-City Neighborhood Organization, said there's quite an opportunity because both are being planned at the same time. Local groups want to make sure there will be a "sense of continuity" from the greenway to the Mid-City Market, with benches and trellis work in the shopping center, for example, being the same color or style as benches and trellis work in the greenway.

Because of this unique opportunity, Farwell said several stakeholders want to ask the city to change its development plans slightly to allow the section of the Greenway by the Mid-City Market to be developed first as a sort of "proof of concept."

A principle of the Lafitte Greenway has been that it would be completed all at once so that the city isn't left with gaps and a nonfunctional, disjointed bikeway. But with the shopping center in design at the same time, Farwell said there's a precious chance to make sure both fit together, and accelerating this section of the bikeway could help ensure that the shopping center lures the highest-quality retailers. "It's kind of hard to convince retailers to come into an area that overlooks a big dirt field," she said.

Bart Everson, president of the Friends of the Lafitte Corridor, said his group has been a strong believer in doing the project all at once rather than piecemeal, but he said Farwell's idea could be a good one.

"You've got to break ground first somewhere, and we've always thought that that area really lends itself to getting started first because it's narrow and the design is simpler," Everson said, adding that his group has raised some grant money that could be applied to this area. "To prove that there can be something there, as quickly as possible, that makes sense. We want everybody to work together on this."

Economic engine?

Everson said the Friends of the Lafitte Corridor could not be more excited about the Mid-City Market, because the group thinks it proves their point that the greenway will be a catalyst for economic development. He said the developers must have known that Delgado students could ride bikes to the grocery store along the greenway.

"This is going to create an amenity that will attract businesses into the neighborhood. We're looking forward to working with the developer and the relevant parties to make it the best possible project," Everson said.

The money is in hand for the Lafitte Greenway project, and the design team just started working on plans in May. The greenway designers, leadership of the Mid-City Neighborhood Organization and the Friends of the Lafitte Corridor were scheduled to meet last night to talk about the project, and public meetings for the design and planning process will probably begin in August.

On Monday night, representatives from Stirling will come to the Mid-City Neighborhood Organization's monthly meeting at the Grace Episcopal Church at 3700 Canal St. to present their plans. The meeting begins at 6 p.m., and the Stirling folks have the floor at 6:15 p.m.

Farwell said the neighborhood couldn't be more excited about a major pocket of blight being redeveloped and looks forward to working with Stirling on plans.

Grand plans for space

Neighbors want to make sure that Carrollton, not Bienville, is the major route for trucks coming to the site.

They also want to make sure it doesn't look like a "cookie-cutter, Atlanta-style shopping center." They also see opportunities for building rain gardens into the site to capture water, and even creating a recirculation system so that water can be captured and reused to irrigate green space at the site.

They also would like to see as many local retailers as possible worked into the tenant list.

"This could truly be a ground-breaking urban redevelopment project. We're trying to encourage the best of the best. We're

hoping they can support us in that," Farwell said.

Underhill said meetings so far with the Mid-City Neighborhood Organization and other stakeholders have been "very positive."

"Our project is trying to be very sensitive to the Lafitte Greenway plans. We're building a high-quality project," Underhill said.

Winn-Dixie had a Mid-City location before Hurricane Katrina, but the site became a Home Depot after the storm.

The new store will be directly across the street from Rouses. Before Katrina, there were three grocery stores in the area: Winn-Dixie; the Sav-A-Center, which was bought out by Rouses in 2007; and a Robert Fresh Market at the corner of Canal and Carrollton, which is now a Walgreens.

The Mid-City architecture firm VergesRome is handling the design. No contractor has been selected.

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Rebecca Mowbray can be reached at rmowbray@timespicayune.com or 504.826.3417.

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