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'A source of pride'



The Latino-themed architecture designed by Williams-Blackstock along with the store names written in Spanish are clues as to whom the future Plaza Fiesta is tailored.

MONEY

Shopping center aimed at Hoover Latino population

By MICHAEL TOMBERLIN

News staff writer

Two Hispanic businessmen are building what is believed to be the area's first shopping center developed specifically to cater to Latino shoppers. Brothers Jose and Rafael Chavez, who own two Mexican groceries and four restaurants in the area, think the time is right for Plaza Fiesta, which is under construction on a 3.5 acre site at the intersection of Lorna Road and Colonial Drive.

The 17,000-square-foot shopping center will have Latin-themed architecture and house El Mercado Mexican grocery store; Iguana Grill, an authentic Mexican restaurant; Lavanderia, a laundromat; and El Galope, a clothing and cultural store.

"As a member of the growing Hispanic community here in Birmingham, we knew first hand that there was a demand for products and services geared especially towards this market," Jose said. "Plaza Fiesta will offer convenience in an upscale setting and will be a source of pride for the Spanish-speaking people in Birmingham."

The Chavez brothers will operate the center's businesses along with cousins.

The Chavez brothers hired Hollis Real Estate to develop the property. Bradford Building Co. is constructing the shopping center, which was designed by Sean Whitt of Williams-Blackstock Architects.

Mark Hollis, founder of Hollis Real Estate, said Plaza Fiesta will be able to capitalize on an established market. "Because of the large Hispanic population that now lives in the Hoover area, a demand has been created that our client will fill," Hollis said.

U.S. Census estimates last year said Alabama has about 98,000 Hispanics, up nearly 300 percent in the past 14 years. The Census estimates the Birmingham area's Hispanic population to be nearly 17,000, though officials said the actual figure is probably closer to 70,000 counting the undocumented.

Several Hoover apartment complexes on or near Lorna Road are mostly occupied by Hispanic tenants. "It's the epicenter for the Hispanic growth in the Birmingham area," said Rich Chism, a principal with Hollis.

UAB retail professor Robert Robicheaux said the center will be successful if it sees Hispanics as its core, but not its sole market. "The demographics will tell you they've got the ready-made population right there," he said. "But they would be well-advised to be sure they appeal to the non-Hispanic population as well."

The Plaza Fiesta project has been in the planning stages for a year and has received all needed approvals from the city.

Construction begins at a time when Hoover's growing Hispanic population has triggered tension. For example, the city closed a multicultural resource center and has proposed changes to zoning laws limiting the number of people who can live in a residence.



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But Jose said he has not experienced any hostility in the area. "I've been here for about 20 years already, and I've never had any problem," Jose said.

The Chavez brothers began working in their father's 3,000-square-foot grocery store in Guadalajara, Mexico, when they were 10 years old.

The brothers came to the United States in 1986 and worked in Atlanta as bus boys, waiters, shift managers and store managers of Mexican restaurants before moving to Alabama in 1997. Rafael opened his first restaurant in Leeds that year and in 2001 Jose opened the first grocery store in Hoover.

The brothers lately have been expanding their businesses, with the most recent being the Don Pepe Mexican Restaurant at the Village at Lee Branch shopping center off U.S. 280.

Chism said the new shopping center is designed to help create a positive image of the area's Hispanic culture.

"Plaza Fiesta is intended to be a source of pride for the Hispanic community and the community as a whole," he said.

Authentic items

The Chavez brothers began exploring the possibility of creating the new center when their existing Lorna Road store needed more space. That store, about a mile down from the center's site, will relocate into the shopping center.

El Mercado will be a full-service grocery store, with authentic items imported from Mexico. The cuts of meat and fish selections will be tailored to Hispanic preferences. A Latino bakery will sell specialty items, including freshly made tortillas and tamales.



NEWS STAFF/JERRY AYRES

Developers Rich Chism, left, and Mark Hollis, center, of Hollis Real Estate watch work under way at the site of the future Plaza Fiesta with one of the owners, Jose Chavez, right.

The Iguana Grill will offer traditional Tex-Mex cuisine along with authentic Mexican dishes such as carnitas and gorditas.

El Galope, Spanish for "The Gallop," will sell boots, hats and Hispanic apparel, along with music, books and religious items. It will also sell Mexican soccer team uniforms and soccer shoes.

Even Lavanderia will be a Hispanic take on a typical laundromat, Jose said.

"The interior of the laundromat will be painted in bright colors and be as fun as a laundromat can be," he said. "Latin music will be played from a stereo system and televisions will feature Latin channels."

As with the rest of the center, employees at the laundromat will speak Spanish and be able to assist customers and directions on the washers and dryers will be in Spanish.

Wachovia Small Business Capital provided primary financing for the project and Southern Development Council Inc. provided secondary financing, using an SBA 504 loan.

"This concept will bring together a lot of the businesses owned by Jose and Rafael and it serves a huge need in our community," said Sam Renta of Wachovia Small Business Capital. "These guys are smart; they both have been around the business for a long time. They understand it, know who their market is, and they have found a void that needs to be filled."

If Plaza Fiesta is successful, Jose said he and his brother will consider doing other centers in communities with clusters of Hispanic populations such as Center Point, Pelham, Alabaster, or Calera.

"If it works well for us, we will want to do more, that's for sure," he said.

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