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Big things expected of North College Avenue retail center

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FORT COLLINS — North College Marketplace won't be just another shopping center in Fort Collins, its proponents say.

"It's really an iconic project to turn around the north side of Fort Collins," said Ron Lautzenheiser, owner of Big O Tires and Grease Monkey.

Lautzenheiser's two businesses are on the same street as North College Marketplace, a 26-acre grocery-anchored retail and restaurant space under construction at the northeast corner of North College Avenue and Willox Lane.

The shopping center, which is scheduled to open June 1, gets its name from the Marketplace Store, a 123,000-square-foot mega-King Soopers.

The center will give a boost to the "substandard portion of the city," as Lautzenheiser dubbed the area north of downtown.

Add to that infrastructure improvements, new housing projects and business expansions and relocations, including the relocation of the Rocky Mountain Innosphere incubator at the end of 2010.

"Drive across the railroad tracks, and it's like a different city. ... I used to call it the other Fort Collins," said Lautzenheiser, a board member with the North Fort Collins Business Association and a member of the citizens advisory group for the Fort Collins Urban Renewal Authority.

The shopping center project will provide hundreds of jobs and a grocery store option in addition to the Albertsons store at the southeast corner of College and Willox.

"This adds an additional amenity and destination for those who need shopping in north Fort Collins," said Christina Vincent, redevelopment program administrator for the Fort Collins Urban Renewal Authority.

The Beginning Steps

In spring 2008, Loveland Commercial LLC — developer of Thompson Valley Towne Center in southwest Loveland — approached the city about developing an empty parcel of land at North College and Willox Lane that, with the addition of smaller parcels, became the site of the North College Marketplace.

Due to project site constraints, the urban renewal authority invested in public improvements to the site that included wetlands mitigation and off-site street work, such as adding a roundabout on Willox and widening and adding turn lanes and sidewalks to sections of North College.

The total project cost \$40 million, with \$8 million coming from tax-increment financing from the urban renewal authority.

The urban renewal funding offset Loveland Commercial's investment, giving the developer an incentive to do a project that otherwise would not have been economically viable, Lautzenheiser said.

In May, Loveland Commercial began construction on the project, which spans 175,000 square feet.

Eric Holsapple, partner with Loveland Commercial, originally thought the grocery anchor would be a smaller King Soopers store, similar to the 65,000-square-foot store at the Thompson Valley Towne Center, which opened in 1999.

But Kroger wanted to try out the Marketplace concept in Fort Collins, where there are four existing King Soopers stores.

The first Marketplace in Colorado is opening in Greeley Feb. 23; another one is in the works in Arvada, but a date has not been set.

The Marketplace Store

The new format combines the traditional King Soopers grocery store with expanded deli, meat and seafood, kitchen and housewares, and floral departments.

It adds in soft goods — towels, blankets, sheets and the like — household items and a drive-through pharmacy, as well as on-site outlets such as Fred Meyer Jewelers and Starbucks.

In addition to the Marketplace Store, the shopping center will include, according to Loveland Commercial's site plans:

- A 3,800-square-foot Chase Bank building.
- A 6,400-square-foot Bullfrog Wine and Spirits liquor store.
- A Great Clips salon.

The focus of the city's North College Corridor Plan, last updated in 2007, is to promote development activity and upgrade the image of North College, as well as improve the infrastructure along North College by adding sidewalks, bike lanes and streetscape features.

It covers an 800-acre area along North College from the Cache la Poudre River at the northern edge of downtown to Colorado 1, extending a half mile east and west of College Avenue.