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First look: Memorial City Mall's former Sears site to transform into town center

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Two years after tearing down the building that once housed Memorial City Mall's Sears store, Houston-based MetroNational has finally unveiled its plans for what will replace it — and the company's vision for the site goes far beyond what many expected.

During a May 16 meeting with the Houston Business Journal, MetroNational President Jason Johnson outlined the company's intent to build a 27-acre urban infill development, dubbed Memorial Town Square, which eventually will feature a mix of retail, coworking, traditional office and multifamily spaces. The new town square will be located at the corner of Gessner Road and Barryknoll Lane.

The first phase of the project will focus on building 10 standalone retail buildings, which will total 190,000 square feet and will



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Memorial Town Square will feature 27 acres of retail, coworking, traditional office and multifamily spaces.

surround a new half-acre green space.

“We did a lot of collaborative work with the surrounding community,” Johnson said. “What we found was that there was a desire for more low-density retail that felt like it was already part of the area. Our goal is to build something that feels like it was there all along.”

The plan for the project is to bring in more than 40 tenants, combining top-flight restaurants, local boutiques, creative office spaces, and health and wellness facilities, Johnson said.

“When it’s done, Memorial Town Square hopefully will provide a place where families can go to enjoy highly walkable shops, great restaurants and beautiful green spaces,” Johnson said. “Houston may be a metropolitan city; however, Houstonians enjoy having a place that feels like it is all their own.”

As part of the project, MetroNational plans to demolish part of the existing Memorial City Mall to create a new covered entrance. Johnson said the new entrance will help to incorporate the mall into the new town center.

“We wanted to take particular care of the mall because it was the key part of my grandfather’s vision for Memorial City when he started it 50 years ago,” Johnson said. “By reimagining it as part of the town square, it will help to build on my grandfather’s vision.”

MetroNational plans to court tenants that offer both locally curated outlets and national retail offerings, Johnson added.

The first phase of the development is scheduled to break ground next year with an anticipated completion date of 2025.

Once the retail portion of the project is finished, Johnson said the company will start working to build the multifamily piece of the project, which will consist of a tower with 250-plus units and between 50,000 and 60,000 square feet of first-floor retail.

The final piece of the project will be a 375,000-square-foot office building, Johnson said.

The company has not yet set a timeline for the second and third phases of the project.

To design Memorial Town Square, MetroNational turned to San Francisco-based Gensler to come up with the master plan. The company also tapped Houston-based OJB Landscape Architecture to design the outdoor spaces and Dallas-based RSM Design to create environmental graphics and wayfinding.

“We looked around the country and took inspiration from other developments, including Palisades Village in California and Highland Park Village in Dallas,” Johnson said.

To oversee leasing, MetroNational hired Dallas-based Rue. El Segundo, California-based Pacific Retail Capital Partners is serving as development consultant. The company has not yet hired a general contractor, Johnson said.

Other MetroNational growth

For MetroNational, the plan to build Memorial Town Square is just the latest effort by the company to advance Memorial City, which is essentially a 300-acre master-planned community in west Houston.

At the mall itself, MetroNational developed The McAdams, a luxury apartment building on the southeast corner of the mall's parking lot. It opened in 2019.

Earlier this year, the company announced plans to embark on a \$25 million update of the Memorial City Plazas complex, a three-building complex at 800-840 Gessner Road that contains nearly 1 million square feet of office space. Construction work on the renovations is already underway, with all three towers slated for completion in Q4 2022.

MetroNational is also nearing completion of The McKinley, a 25-story luxury multifamily development. It will serve as the anchor of a planned mixed-use development at 9757 Katy Freeway, near the southwest corner of Bunker Hill Road and Interstate 10.

The McKinley is already 75% leased, and Slate Real Estate Development is just finishing up work on the penthouse units, Johnson said. Houston-based Slate, the fee developer on the project, has been completing the project on a floor-by-floor basis.

Meanwhile, the next phase of the mixed-use development — an office tower at 9753 Katy Freeway — recently resumed construction.

MetroNational originally broke ground on the office building in early 2020 but paused construction as the Covid-19 pandemic took hold in Houston. However, MetroNational said in an April 18 announcement that the additional time allowed the developer to update its design of the building.

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