

It's full speed ahead for High Street development



A construction crew works on a courtyard that's part of the High Street development in Williamsburg.

By BENTLEY BOYD
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WILLIAMSBURG -- Never mind the Wall Street headlines and "For Sale" signs across the Peninsula -- the bricks keep going up at the High Street project.

Between 6 million and 7 million of them now grace a two-level parking deck, a movie theater, a building that will house a health club and many other features of the mixed-use development on the commercial strip of Richmond Road.

It's an amazing sight for the residents who drive by every day and remember six years ago when High Street competed with the New Town development in James City County to see which would open a movie theater first. New Town won -- and continues its own build-out today -- but this summer, it finally began to look like High Street would happen.

"We have strong financial backing from Prudential. It allows us to do a lot of things," said Dan Aston, a partner in Roseland Property Co., which is building High Street. "Today it's just about getting it done with the highest quality."

The New Jersey-based Roseland picked up the project in 2004 after the city broke with High Street's first developer, Lerner Enterprises. Aston says the project is benefiting from stabilized labor costs and that everything at High Street but the condominiums will be finished by next summer.

"We're just pushing as hard as we can," he said.

Equipment for stoplights at Treyburn Drive and Ironbound Road went up last week and will soon go up on Richmond Road at the entrance to High Street.

City Planning Director Reed Nester said he is satisfied with the project's progress and added, "It's a very well-built project."

Focus on housingWith New Town getting into the ground first, the High Street project shifted its mixed-use balance toward more housing. Early plans had 400,000 square feet of retail at High Street, but now it will have 225,000 square feet of retail space. About a dozen retail tenants are lined up, Aston said.

High Street's first apartment building of 29 units opened the first week of September, and half its units are already rented, Aston said. The next apartment building, also with 29 units, will be ready for rental in a month.

The 252 apartments originally planned are now down to 191 units across five buildings. They should all be ready by the end of the year, Aston said.

The apartments -- where renting starts with a one-bedroom at \$1,090 a month, up to a two-bedroom at \$1,580 -- have appliances with stainless-steel surfaces; two speakers built into the ceiling for the TV sound; and laundry rooms featuring a Maytag washer and dryer, and enough space to leave the ironing board up.

"We have a lot of 'renters by choice.' They have the affluence to buy a home, but they come here to maintain a certain lifestyle," Aston said.

A few weeks ago, about 500 people attended an open house for the 53 townhomes that will be available, beginning in about two months, he said.

"The site is so large -- some 53 acres -- that people are reluctant to drive onto it because they think it's all still a construction site," Aston said. "But it is starting to look like a community. We truly are creating a neighborhood. It will have a great pedestrian, walking appeal."

'they give it feel'The High Street project fits with Roseland's other work developing urban land up and down the East Coast.

Forty garages styled after colonial carriage houses are available to rent. The 7,000-square-foot clubhouse will include a pool with a lifeguard on duty when it is open; hardwood floors; a billiards room; and an exercise room that will hold \$150,000 worth of equipment. There are also rooms at the clubhouse for people who work at home to hold a business meeting or access the Internet.

"The only difference between here and our other properties is that Williamsburg doesn't have 20-story buildings. Williamsburg is probably the first urban environment in America, and we've tried to honor that tradition. We're really working on the architectural details," Aston said.

Those details include chimney points on the end of buildings and roofs that appear to have slate shingles. Building columns are made out of fiberglass.

"These buildings will look phenomenal for a long time to come," he said. "These are all things that will be here 100 years. They give it texture. They give it feel."

He points to the Movie Tavern's details as prime examples of Roseland's work.

Roseland is spending \$9 million to build the movie theater geared to adults 25 or older who might want dinner and a movie under one roof. One costly detail: the electrical system for each theater space runs through the ceiling, so there are no outlets in the walls that would allow sound to seep from one theater to another.

retail uncertainty

Reworking the eight-screen theater has meant delays. John Hersker, president of the Movie Tavern chain, wanted to open his High Street theater by Labor Day but now says the 34,000-square-foot building will open for business in the late spring.

That means delays for the nearby retail locations. A Five Guys hamburger restaurant is going next door to the theater but still has only exterior walls. The theater and restaurant face a plaza that can hold concerts and art shows and is also bordered by a restaurant with two outdoor fireplaces facing the plaza and a building that will house a wine store, a candy store and a coffee shop, Aston said.

High Street's retail section will have a grand opening in the spring, Aston said.

There's no doubt that High Street is sailing into a headwind. Nationwide, shopping centers reported 8 percent of their square footage was vacant in June, according to the International Council of Shopping Centers.

With the economy worsening, the International Council of Shopping Centers predicts that retail chains will close 144,000 stores in the United States this year -- 7 percent more than closed in 2007.

Nationwide, construction of new retail space was down 37 percent between January and July, compared to the same period in 2007, according to McGraw-Hill Construction.

'unique location'

High Street has made adjustments. Original plans for the High Street frontage on Richmond Road showed two retail buildings to the left of the entrance road, but there is now one, Nester said. That building is now under construction and features a large rotunda. Aston said it will be finished by December.

To the right of the entrance road is a building with a turret on top; about 60 percent of the building will be a health club, Aston said.

"It's shaping up nicely," Nester said. "One of the things we wanted, as we looked at the design of High Street, was to have a building presence rather than a parking presence along Richmond Road."

A March 2006 survey of the city counted 47.2 acres of built shopping center space. High Street will add 17.3 acres to that total. Developed commercial land -- which includes hotels -- amounts to only 5 percent of the city's land.

"Very little of the city is commercial property. That's why we value a high-quality commercial development such as High Street," Nester said.

New Town pulled many local businesses from other locations in the Williamsburg area. Aston confirmed that he has spoken to local businesses interested in moving to High Street.

"We have a unique location because we are right in the center of Williamsburg. Every tourist in Williamsburg comes right by here. There are 30,000 cars going in front of us every day," he said. "We're not in competition with New Town. Everyone wants to cast us as the alternative to New Town, but we're more in the center of the city."

High Street project Shopping acres: 17.3

Total acreage: 53

Apartments: 191

Town houses: 53

Cool feature: One restaurant will feature two outdoor fireplaces