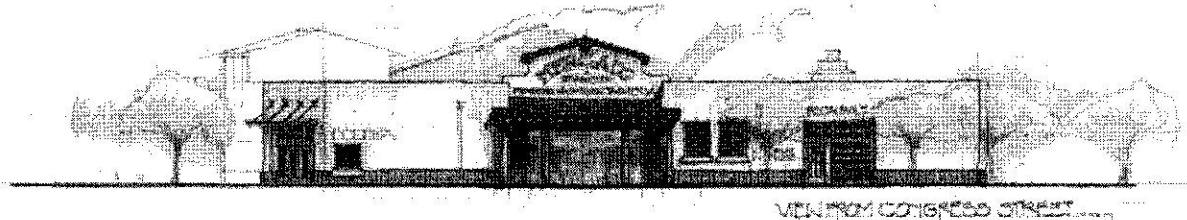


DOWNTOWN TUCSONAN

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The Gadsden Company

by Lee Allen



Ask partner members of The Gadsden Company if they think in terms of local development projects that bridge the old with the new and three heads will nod in the affirmative and in unison.

"We think in a common vernacular," says Adam Weinstein in discussing the company philosophy of urbanism. "Our thoughts include elements of Tucson's charm, the artistic, the historical, and the modern. Our planning strategy follows all the most contemporary best practices. It just happens to be grounded in tradition and we all respect that."

Much of that thought will get public exposure, first on October 19th when designs are unveiled and ground is broken for a downtown Mercado --- then by submission on November 5th of a final proposal to develop 14 acres between the Santa Cruz River and Avenida del Convento, the Mercado District --- followed by a summer 2008 construction start date of residential condominiums and retail space at Monier Brickyard nearby.

All of this excitement takes place even as the company's Hoff House headquarters, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, undergoes its own refurbishing at 127 W. Franklin St. "Fixing up our own house is another example of a quality project that fits into our ethics of how we do things," says patriarch/partner Jerry Dixon, a registered engineer involved in local and regional construction for over 30 years.

"The walls of this building are 22 inch thick adobe, ceilings are 14 feet high, floors are of polished walnut. Everything in here was painstakingly done right even if it took a bit more time. And that's our message to the City in this soft market --- let's do it right instead of just doing it quickly," he says. "Maybe it took this long because time was needed for the right things to happen...not just some thing, but the right thing," says Kira Dixon-Weinstein who is in charge of the Mercado San Agustin public market slated to open by mid-2008.

The trio of decision-makers concur that it is the right time for a western extension of downtown to become a reality. "We happen to think Avenida del Convento, from Congress to Cushing Streets, is going to be downtown's most significant street," says Dixon. "When people get off the freeway at Congress, there will be numerous incentives to come west before looping back to new hotels and a convention center. East and west will both benefit from the connectivity to the 14 acres here. Underpasses at Cushing and Congress are 275 feet wide, allowing a visual connection to the other side of the freeway. I-10 will no longer be a barrier, simply a bridge between the two sides of an expanding city center."

Gadsden is currently overseeing design and development of three commercial/mixed-use properties in the Menlo Park Mercado District and the company is hoping to be successful bidder on other redevelopment. "We're trying to do things that are authentic and meaningful, a somewhat different strategy than other development companies," says degreed-architect Weinstein, "fitting appropriately-planned developments into a broader context, integrating in an infill capacity. It happens to be something that isn't as considered, let's say, in some of the other planning currently going on downtown --- sort of one-and-off projects that are imported models from other cities."

"We're a unique, big, little city, and we don't want to be a copycat of Portland, Austin, Santa Fe or Albuquerque," says Dixon. "Cities should do their own thing in a unique and indigenous way and we've always tried to understand our city, our demographics, and be respectful of where and who we are. We understand there is an incredible opportunity downtown to do the right thing for our future."

First up is Mercado San Agustin, 855 W. Congress St., an open-air public market to be built next to Mercado District housing. Dixon-Weinstein will shepherd the \$2 million 14,000 square-foot marketplace that will also house a café, a taqueria, a flower vendor, and other small businesses. "We created Mercado San Agustin to be the first incarnation of a public market in Tucson, sort of a small business incubator with about two dozen vendor stalls," she says.

Come next summer, Adam Weinstein hopes to be guiding construction of the Monier Brickyard Building south of the Mercado, a Mission Revival-style red brick structure on the original brickyard site. "These demonstration projects are designed as connections to the Origins heritage complex, a gateway into sort of a new Tucson, if you will, all the history with contemporary amenities."

Jerry Dixon keeps watch on the company's bid to design and develop the 14 acres west of the freeway. He's on top of that and wants everybody else there too. "The city is in a position to get behind the private development community and assist in a partnership to make these things happen. This is a 30-month window of opportunity with downtown as a construction zone. If the city sets the table correctly, wonderful things will happen. If, in less than three years when I-10 is done, the streetcar is delivered, and the Origins Phase I complex is finished --- if these improvements aren't complete in a comprehensible manner, we haven't succeeded. It's time to move, and move aggressively, in a positive direction."
