

## **Downtown Digs: Streetcar, Business Newcomers at Center of Development.**

Written by By Teya Vitu

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The modern streetcar is front and center for the next phase of downtown revitalization.

This year, 435 employees will move into the new, nine-story UniSource Energy/Tucson Electric Power headquarters. By April, Buffalo Exchange will open up a shop on Congress Street and the Sonoran Institute should be in 44 E. Broadway.

Also on the horizon, as many as three towers of university student housing could go up around the Rialto Theatre, and a hotel is part of three proposals for mixed-use development for an eight-acre strip, where the temporary Greyhound terminal stands along the Interstate 10 frontage road.

No doubt, though, streetcar construction will be the defining event for the next two years as 3.9 miles of tracks are slated to be installed from mid-2011 through early 2013. The tracks would connect University Medical Center, the University of Arizona, University Boulevard, Fourth Avenue, downtown and the near West Side.

The streetcar would travel to the West Side across a new Cushing Street Bridge, which should start construction in spring and is slated for completion in mid-2012, said Michael Barton, project manager for HDR Engineering.

Most eager to see a streetcar in motion, is Jerry Dixon, patriarch of the family enterprise behind the Mercado District of Menlo Park and Mission District. The streetcar and Cushing Street Bridge would feed into his developments on 30 acres, along with another 35 acres of city property once envisioned as a museum row.

"By building one bridge across the Santa Cruz River, the city effectively doubles the size of downtown, giving access to 65 acres," Dixon said.

Dixon's Gadsden Company plans to build a nine-block Mission District community south of West Congress Street and west of I-10. The proposal calls for three residential towers of six and eight stories to house 400 people, 250,000 square feet of retail and a boutique hotel.

The new Mercado San Agustin is the only element built so far, but this summer Dixon wants to add a 12,000-square-foot Congress Street Market Hall. Also along Congress, at the Mission District's northeast corner, construction should start soon on a six-story, 143-unit senior housing project by Senior Housing Group.

Dixon has no timeline for the rest of the Mission District. Next in line, however, would be 35,000 feet of retail along Congress Street with 85 residential units above the shops.

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Dixon anticipates a large market hall at the southern edge of the property that he's modeling after the Central Market Hall in Budapest, Hungary. He envisions the streetcar rolling into the hall.

"It will be the big brother of the Mercado San Agustin," Dixon said.

For Buffalo Exchange, the time is right now for downtown. Buffalo Exchange has opened 40 stores in hip neighborhoods around the country, but the Tucson-based buy-sell-trade clothing retailer never looked at downtown Tucson. The turning point for company president and co-founder Kerstin Block was a downtown bus tour she took in 2010 as she served on the Tucson Regional Entrepreneurial Economy Taskforce.

"That was a big eye opener for me. It made me see there's a lot of stuff going on that is positive," Block said. She added that Providence Service Corp.'s CEO Fletcher McCusker prodded her to bring Buffalo Exchange downtown, as he pushed the Sonoran Institute to move its offices into his 44 E. Broadway building.

Long located on the east side, the Sonoran Institute wanted to be downtown but was unable to find 6,000 square feet at a workable price.

"Fletcher made a deal that worked for us," Executive Director Luther Propst said. "We didn't want to be in one of the new buildings. We wanted to be in a building with character.

"It's a chance for us to live our mission," he continued. "It's so close to the bus station and the high speed rail that will eventually go to Phoenix and Los Angeles. There is the perspective of being able to walk, take the bus. The proximity will be exciting for us to interact with the city council and board of supervisors. It will give us more of a platform to be involved in local issues."

Providence will occupy 44 E. Broadway, as it already does the neighboring 50 E. and 64 E. Broadway, bringing a total of 100 employees downtown.

Across Scott Avenue, the UniSource headquarters will plop an urban anchor on Broadway. This will include 12,000 square feet of retail, and the TEP downtown presence will soar from 85 to about 435 by November.

"Many of our counterparts build cafeterias for employees. We are consciously not doing that," said Steve Lynn, vice president and chief customer officer at TEP. "We want people to go out to lunch."

Two requests for proposals from the city and UA could reshape the eastern and western edges of downtown.

The city is considering three proposals for the eight acres along the freeway frontage road, where the Greyhound station sits. Each proposal involves a hotel and two include combinations of residential and commercial.

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Across downtown, where Congress, Broadway, Toole and Fourth Avenue converge, developers Jim Campbell and Ron Schwabe have a pair of proposals for student housing.

Campbell has his long-simmering Plaza Centro, which now looks like an 11-story tower for 550-600 students next to the Rialto, and 150 student beds in three-stories atop the Plaza Centro Garage now under construction.

Schwabe proposes 148 units with 360 beds for a vacant lot at the southeast corner of Broadway and Fifth Avenue. This would involve three stories of student housing above a four-story parking garage.

To the west, Scott Stiteler has half ownership of the Rialto Block and owns One North Fifth Apartments and the retail strip across the street. Each has vacancies, and Stiteler reports interest for all the space.

The UA will offer graduate courses in the former Walgreens building at Stone Avenue and Pennington Street, now called the Roy Place Building with its restored 1929 faÁade. The Drachman Institute and UA Bookstores will also have a presence at Roy Place.

The unifying factor for all these projects? The streetcar would run by each of them, except the Roy Place Building, a quick block to the north.