

## Cowtown tapping into vaquero roots

### Fort Worth: 3 major developments target Hispanic population

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By JEFF MOSIER / The Dallas Morning News

FORT WORTH – Tourism marketers boast that Fort Worth is the city of "cowboys and culture."

But Rosa Navejar, president of the Fort Worth Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, has a question. "If you look at history, who taught the cowboys?" she asked. "Vaqueros."

The steady growth in Cowtown's Latino population, which has doubled since 1990, has developers embracing a New West that looks a lot like the Old West.

At least three major Hispanic-themed retail projects are planned or in the works, each in neighborhoods that have struggled to attract development in recent decades.

The \$4 million Mexican-style Mercado on North Main Street is mostly finished, and the city is looking for a buyer. The city took over the project, inspired by San Antonio's market, when the original developer was unable to raise private funds to complete what was started with government secured loans.

Along Interstate 35W, south of downtown, the former Fort Worth Town Center Mall, a struggling outlet, has changed its name to La Gran Plaza. The owner could receive about \$22 million in sales tax refunds to offset his planned \$40 million-plus investment in the mall, which includes creating a Spanish colonial facade, adding space and building a 4,000-seat area for Mexican rodeos and concerts.

Across the highway at the former Texas Steel plant site, the Plaza de Las Américas is expected to start construction this year. The 250,000-square-foot shopping and office complex could bring several hundred jobs to the area.

"The risk-taking formula has changed considerably, say, from five or 10 years ago," said Ed Rincón, president of a multicultural business research firm. "Historically, Hispanics have never really been perceived as an economic entity."

In the past, a few beer and diaper companies would target Hispanic families, but there was little recognition of their buying power. Now, he said, more developers are willing to risk larger amounts to capture the growing Hispanic market. La Gran Plaza, because of its 1 million square feet, would be unique to North Texas.

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The city of Fort Worth is looking for a buyer of the \$4 million Mercado, which was inspired by San Antonio's market. The development is one of three Hispanic-themed retail projects aimed at tapping into Fort Worth's rising Latino population.

Sal Espino, a newly elected City Council member whose district includes the Mercado, said these projects highlight two important trends.

The number of Hispanics has increased from 20 percent to 30 percent of Fort Worth's population between 1990 and 2000, and Mr. Espino estimates that number could be as high as 35 percent now. Also, one of the biggest development trends in the last few years is the renewed interest in downtowns. In many cases, those neighborhoods near downtown are predominantly minority.

"The central city is seeing a lot of revitalization," he said. "People want to stay close to the city."

The Mercado, however, has the potential to attract Hispanic customers – its ZIP code is about 90 percent Latino – and tourists of other ethnic backgrounds, Mr. Espino said.

Fernando Costa, Fort Worth's planning director, said the Mercado lies strategically between the Fort Worth Stockyards and downtown, two of the area's biggest tourist draws. "There is great potential for the North Main corridor," he said, noting that the expansion of downtown across the Trinity River will push it even closer to the Mercado.

At La Gran Plaza, the Southern California-based owner has already started renovations needed to revive part of Fort Worth's retail history.

The building was constructed in 1962 as Fort Worth's first regional mall, then called Seminary South Mall. But during the next several decades, other modern malls opened, and the open-air Seminary South became a relic.

When a San Francisco firm was hired to renovate and enclose it in the 1980s, a company official said that "the best years are ahead." Despite the \$25 million facelift, the mall continued its decline as department stores and other major chains continued to leave.

Today, many of the storefronts are empty, and the owner has leased space to nontraditional tenants such as a pair of dollar stores, a supermarket and a liquor store.

José de Jesús Legaspi, the owner of La Gran Plaza, said he envisions the redevelopment as more than just another mall. He imagines it as a town center, inspired by Mexico City's Zócalo public square, where nearby residents can satisfy all their needs through local, regional and national retailers as well as financial and medical businesses.

"We will provide a lot more to the community," he said. "It would act more as a central city for the residents there."

At the nearby 21-acre site of the Plaza de Las Américas, the plans also call for a mixture of retail and professional services as well as an 18,000-square-foot center for weddings, quinceañeras and other events. The project could qualify for property tax abatements because of its location in a neighborhood empowerment zone.

Although the developer could not be reached for comment, his Web site said that more than 20,000 people live within one mile of the site and that 81 percent are Hispanic.

However, the success of these projects is not guaranteed.

The city does not have an owner for the Mercado. Previous attempts to revitalize the old Seminary South have fallen short. And according to the Plaza de Las Américas Web site, there has not been a major retail development within three miles of that site in the last 30 years.

Mr. Rincón, who also teaches a Hispanic marketing class at Southern Methodist University, said developers can't assume they'll capture this suddenly desirable market. They must study regional business trends, get to know their customers and make sure they go beyond the typical shopping center.

"They are good concepts that could work," Mr. Rincón said. "I just hope they've done their research."

E-mail [jmosier@dallasnews.com](mailto:jmosier@dallasnews.com)

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