

HAWKS PRAIRIE GATEWAY

Lacey development spans 800 acres



Steve Bloom/The Olympian

Local developer Tri Vo has announced plans for an 800-acre commercial and residential complex located in a wooded, undeveloped area along Interstate 5 and across the freeway from the Hawks Prairie Wal-Mart at left center.

Plan for project mixes retail with thousands of offices, residences

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BY CHRISTIAN HILL
THE OLYMPIAN

LACEY — A prominent local developer wants to transform 800 acres in Hawks Prairie into a vibrant city center with a sprawling open-air mall, high-rise buildings and about 5,000 apartments, condos and offices.

The project would be the biggest such undertaking in the city's 40-year history and among the most ambitious development projects ever proposed in the county. It could take a decade or more to complete, depending on market demand.

"We want to make this one an icon project in the Northwest," said developer Tri Vo, who holds controlling interest in the project.

Vo has outlined his vision to city officials and discussed the possibility of having public buildings and parks be part of the project. The project is in the

ONLINE

Use the links with this story at www.theolympian.com to read a profile of developer Tri Vo and to learn about his other projects.

very preliminary stages, and Vo has yet to submit any development application to the city.

Outdoors retailer Cabela's is one of several anchor tenants Vo is negotiating with for a prime location in the development, which is tentatively called Hawks Prairie Gateway. It would be primarily northwest of the Interstate 5 interchange at Marvin Road.

Vo will model his so-called lifestyle center after one in Rancho Cucamonga, Calif., known as Victoria Gardens. Earlier this year, city leaders paid a daylong visit to Rancho Cucamonga to see for themselves what Vo wants to develop in Lacey. They even briefly met with Vo there.

Community Development Director Jerry Litt was impressed by what he saw.

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Courtesy of City of Lacey

The Victoria Gardens Lifestyle Center in Rancho Cucamonga, Calif., features an open-air mall where residents can sit, relax and take in some shopping. Developer Tri Vo is using the lifestyle center as a model for a similar project he wants to bring to Hawks Prairie.



The Olympian

At a glance

- **What:** Hawks Prairie Gateway, a proposed open-air "lifestyle" center with shopping, housing units, a recreational center, other amenities
- **Who:** Developer Tri Vo and other entities
- **Where:** Northwest of the interchange of Interstate 5 and Marvin Road
- **When:** Full completion of the planned project could take a decade or more

DEVELOPMENT

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"I've seen a lot of commercial development, and Victoria Garden is better than anything I've seen anywhere," he said.

Not without challenges

Some of Vo's property is outside the city limits in Lacey's urban growth area. There is a moratorium on development there because the city is running out of water to serve new developments. The city provides water to customers in the city and in its urban growth area just outside the city limits.

The city is working with the state Department of Ecology on its applications for rights to pump more water.

In addition, the development would require extensive improvements to roads and utility systems, which the city has planned on for years. Vo and his partners would take on part of that cost, but the city is positioning itself to provide financial assistance.

It likely would seek state grant funding to pay for nearly \$10 million in improvements. It plans to seek authority from the state to use a financing tool the Legislature just passed to pay for the planned upgrade of the I-5 interchange at Marvin Road to handle additional traffic generated by Hawks Prairie Gateway and other new development in the area.

"That likely will take a couple of years," City Manager Greg Cuoio said.

Vo could begin his development project using the existing infrastructure and available water, but he couldn't go much beyond that without the upgraded services in place, the city manager said.

Cuoio and other city leaders think the public investment could pay off by giving the community a vibrant center that draws people locally and regionally and provides jobs and tourism for the city and county.

"This is exactly what the city has envisioned for nearly 18 to 20 years," Cuoio said.

Years in the making

The city has long proposed a city center in the area. Several years ago, the city refined its vision for the Hawks Prairie Business

District, which generally runs along the interstate between Marvin and Carpenter roads.

Its vision featured an office park, outlet mall, shopping center, town square and recreation — an ice rink, swimming pools and gym. It also includes a hotel and conference center.

Vo and his partner bought most of the properties zoned for business-district development when it purchased a 373-acre parcel in October that had long been owned by a family partnership. He has since acquired or has under contract properties surrounding that parcel.

Vo hired architects to put his vision of the project on paper as a development master plan. The vision, as explained to city officials, is consistent with the city's own concept, Cuoio said.

Hawks Prairie Gateway would feature an open-air mall with plazas that would take up between 80 and 92 acres, the developer said. The project would feature several anchor tenants and possibly public facilities, such as a library or performing arts theater, Vo said.

"We're talking to more than one outdoor national company, not just Cabela's," he said.

In addition, the project would include high-rise buildings that contain apartments, condos and offices, Vo said. The buildings could be up to 30 stories high, he said.

"We want to make the people live right on the mall there," he said.

The ultimate cost of the center hasn't been determined, but is likely to be more than \$100 million.

Development requirements within the Hawks Prairie Business District don't limit the height of buildings, said Litt, the community development director.

"A skyline could develop over time," Litt said.

Vo has mentioned high-rise buildings to city officials but didn't say their height would exceed 12 stories, Cuoio said.

In May, Vo will attend the International Council of Shopping Centers spring convention in Las Vegas to showcase his project to prospective retailers, brokers and financial institutions. Litt said he'll attend the convention on the city's



Courtesy of City of Lacey

Victoria Gardens in inland Southern California features stores that face the street, sidewalks and on-street parking so pedestrians can feel comfortable milling about.

behalf to learn who might be interested in the project and to provide information on city development requirements. The community development director has attended the convention previously.

More than shopping

Rancho Cucamonga, the home of Victoria Gardens, is 60 miles east of Los Angeles. It has a population of nearly 170,000 residents.

The 147-acre lifestyle center is surrounded by a 253-acre development featuring condos, apartments, townhouses, parks, trails and schools. The land once was dominated by vineyards and arid land.

Victoria Gardens opened in October 2004 and now has more than 100 mainly high-end retailers. Bass Pro Shops announced it will open a 180,000-square-foot store next year. The store has similar attractions to those found in a Cabela's store, including casting ponds, indoor aquariums and outdoor education areas.

A cultural center is under construction. It will feature a city library, 540-seat theater and Celebration Hall, with meeting and event space. The center is scheduled to open this summer.

In 1977, voters agreed to incorporate Rancho Cucamonga from communities in San Bernardino County, each with small, failing downtowns, said Linda Daniels, the city's redevelopment director.

"We had these three communities with an identity that wasn't parallel with what Rancho Cucamonga is today, and Victoria Gardens has brought that," she said during a telephone interview.

Residents frequently go to Victoria Gardens to walk the streets, purchase a book and spend time there, she said. Victoria Gardens has far exceeded the community's expectations, she continued.

"It's a meeting place. It's a destination point. It's more than just shopping. You can go down there for a variety of reasons," Daniels said.

Whether Lacey has a similar development depends on Vo's ability to successfully negotiate both financing and tenants, and the city's success in upgrading its road and utilities and securing more water.

"It's a step-by-step, slow process, and we need to have successes along the way," Cuoio said.

While the project is ambitious, it hasn't come by accident, Vo said, but through planning and effort.

"It's not a matter of if," he said. "It's a matter of when."

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