

# Developers eye revamp of Buena Park Mall by adding residents to retail

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**GABRIEL SAN ROMÁN**

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Gabriel San Román is a feature writer for TimesOC. He previously worked at OC Weekly – as a reporter, podcast producer and columnist – until the newspaper’s closing in late 2019. San Román also loves the game of basketball. He may or may not be the tallest Mexican in O.C.



**Developers plan to add 1,300 residential units around the Buena Park Mall’s west end called the “Village” project.**

(Scott Smeltzer / Staff Photographer)

A faded imprint of a Sears marquee sign is the only visible reminder of the retail store that once anchored the Buena Park Mall for decades but is now an abandoned appendage. Sears closed in early 2020, right before the coronavirus pandemic, as a harbinger of hardships to come.

After waves of infections and color-coded capacity limits, the mall’s corridors have similarly hallowed out; storefronts that once sold perfumes, shoes and sports apparel are now darkened with their fences pulled down.

In an era of online shopping, it’s easy to write off the former Sears building and even the Buena Park Mall as retail relics.

But Merlone Geier Partners is hoping to transform the withered west end of the mall into the Village, a vibrant community of residents, ones who will live, shop and dine in the heart of Buena Park Downtown.

And the change will start with tearing down the former Sears building.

“We see the introduction of housing here being a catalyst for new business activity in the area,” said Will Geier, vice president of Merlone Geier Partners. “Both residents and surrounding businesses will benefit from being next to each other.”

On Nov. 4, a community presentation spelled out the vision for the Village. Residents sat attentively in the basement of the Buena Park Library as representatives for the developers outlined plans to build 1,300 units of apartments and townhomes that will lock into place with the existing mall, Krikorian Metroplex and restaurants.



**Developers hope to demolish the old Sears at the Buena Park Mall and replace it with the Village project.**

(Scott Smeltzer / Staff Photographer)

Merlone Geier Partners first acquired the Sears building in 2019 and leased it to the retail giant for two years until it went out of business. The adjacent parking lot has provided a home for a weekly farmer’s market and an occasional traveling circus. But the developer sees much more potential for the property.

“We always did view this as a great housing site,” Geier said. “We considered other potential uses prior to pursuing the plan that we’ve proposed but housing was always at the top of our list here.”

In reimagining the traditional mall, the Village shares a similar redevelopment spirit with Simon Property Group in Brea. Two years ago, the Brea Mall owners submitted a mixed-use project with the city that included tearing down a dormant Sears building in favor of new housing, restaurants and retail.

Only, the Village dwarfs such plans in residential size and retail necessity.

“The mall has had a very rocky history for decades,” said Susan Sonne, a Buena Park city councilwoman whose District 3 encompasses the mall. “The Village could be a great thing for the city, if we do this right.”

Sonne campaigned on a platform that included reimagining the Buena Park Mall and vows to help facilitate an open process that addresses any resident concerns along the way.

A row of business owners with Grange Hall 39, a new food hall in a pedestrian walkway known as the Krikorian Courtyard, felt particularly invested as they listened to the community presentation on the Village.

Before the pandemic, the Buena Park Mall hoped that a food hall would attract people, especially moviegoers, to the area. The concept of bringing fast and casual food stalls under one roof thrived elsewhere — from Stanton’s Rodeo 39 to Anaheim’s Packing House.



**Bill McMullan is owner of Egg Slice, a business in Grange Hall 39 at the Buena Park Mall.**  
(Scott Smeltzer / Staff Photographer)

The second food stall to open at Grange Hall 39 was Bill McMullan's Egg Slice, which offers upscale breakfast sandwiches at a quick service pace.

McMullan fondly recalls trips to the Buena Park Mall during his West Anaheim upbringing in the 1960s. "When we were growing up, the only mall we knew was Buena Park Mall," he said. "When you wanted desert boots back in the '60s, John Hardy's at the mall is where you came."

After spending years as a corporate chef in Australia, Japan and Europe, he later owned a breakfast sandwich shop abroad before bringing the concept to Costa Mesa as a popup.

Eric Choi, mall owner and leasing manager, visited Egg Slice one morning and offered McMullan the opportunity to check out the future site of Grange Hall 39. McMullan gladly accepted and found himself back at the mall of his youth.



**The bacon egg and cheese sandwich on a buttered brioche with chili jam from Egg Slice.**

(Scott Smeltzer / Staff Photographer )

"To come back and see its transformation has been pretty interesting for me," he said. "Of course, as a vendor in Grange Hall 39, we feel thrilled at the possibility of more traffic. I, personally, like the idea of a renaissance of the old medieval villages with housing, food, clothing, entertainment, exercise, and work all within easy walking distance of each other."

In the meantime, McMullan is looking forward to feeding hungry construction crews.

With the movie theater and the mall having suffered on account of the pandemic, Grange Hall 39 remains something of a hidden gem, tucked away at the backside of the mall, away from street view.



**Brandon Takanabe is the owner of Burger Monster, a business in Grange Hall 39 at the Buena Park Mall.**  
(Scott Smeltzer / Staff Photographer)

Burger Monster, another of its vendors, opened earlier this year. “American Werewolf,” “Dracula” and “Lycan” gourmet burgers and specialty fries fill out its frightfully delicious menu. Brandon Takanabe started out as a cook before buying Burger Monster during its food truck days; he welcomed the opportunity to be a part of Grange Hall 39, but construction delays meant its opening came amid the pandemic.

“Business hasn’t been great,” he said. “We’re trying to make it more inviting to get people to stay and hang out instead of just getting food and leaving.”

The Village hopes to solve those issues by creating a mixed-use experience at the Buena Park Mall, one where Grange Hall 39’s location is an asset, not a liability for lost customers.

“It’s right at the connection of our site and the existing pedestrian plaza,” Geier said. “We see that area as an important node where residential and commercial comes together.”

Like his Grange Hall neighbors, Takanabe welcomes the Village’s arrival, especially as presenters reassured business owners that the project would be residential only. But it can’t come soon enough as Takanabe signed a 3-year lease and is just hoping to make it through the end of this year, somehow.



**Burger Monster's Mighty Melt burger with barbecue sauce, coleslaw, bacon, cheddar cheese, beer battered onion rings and a cheddar-cheese-skirted brioche bun.**

(Scott Smeltzer / Staff Photographer)

Plans for the Village were formally submitted with Buena Park this week, the first step of a long journey. If all goes well, construction could begin as early as 2023 with its first residents poised to move in by 2025.

In addition to residential units, there will also be an acre park with its playground and seating areas open to all.

Geier imagines a place where a future resident can walk their dog at the park, pick up a breakfast sandwich at Egg Slice, shop at the mall and take in a movie later that night after dining at Grange Hall 39.

"It's going to be a unique offering in Buena Park," he promised, "and we're excited to get started."