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## **Vestar morphs former landfill into retail destination**

Annalyn Censky  
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Buzzing drills, pounding hammers and the chatter of busy retailers have nearly tuned out the rock music playing from Tempe Marketplace's speakers this week as crews prepared around the clock for a grand opening that will rival a circus.

Stilt-walkers, break-dancers, magicians and musicians are expected to draw more than 8,000 patrons to the open-air shopping center's grand-opening party tonight at 7.

The mall's more than 120 stores, restaurants and entertainment venues started opening in August, and, by this afternoon, Vestar Development Co. officials expect at least 95 percent of the tenants to be open for business.

At 1.3 million square feet, Tempe Marketplace is the largest retail construction project in the Valley since 2001, said Vestar Executive Vice President David Larcher.

The development includes three distinct areas: a lineup of big-box stores, an open-air shopping center with entertainment venues that's called "the District" and classic stand-alone retail and restaurant pads.

The \$270 million mall is expected to draw 20 million visitors annually from a 15-mile radius, create 4,500 new jobs and generate \$300 million in sales in its first year, he said.

The tenants include big names such as Target, Best Buy, Barnes & Noble and Harkins Theatres.

They also include some retailers that are new to the Valley, including clothing store Zizibeh and Dave & Buster's, a national chain with restaurants and arcades.

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## **Getting ready**

All week, construction crews, landscapers and retailers have been putting the final touches on storefronts and the outdoor mall's common areas.

Store owners were preparing, too.

Vince Offutt and his crew from "C" Clearly Window Cleaning were at the mall Wednesday morning prepping windows for promotional graphics and displays.

"Everybody is pitching in, getting ready for Friday," he said. "It's busy."

Although Andrea Reiss opened her Divaz clothing boutique last week, she said she and co-owner Kristie Moore have lost sleep in anticipation of the big day.

"It's hectic. We're putting out stock, tagging clothes, merchandising and cleaning," she said. "We are sitting on the edge of our seats."

The boutique already has had a steady flow of customers, and today should be even busier, Reiss said.

Like many stores in the mall, Divaz is offering special promotions in honor of the grand opening.

Customers can enter to win one of 25 Revolver dresses each priced at \$100 or more, Reiss said. Meanwhile, Aéropostale patrons can enter to win a \$250 shopping spree, and AT&T customers can take advantage of special offers.

## **A former hazard**

The mall's opening marks a positive change for Tempe, Larcher said, considering the 117-acre site used to be a toxic wasteland.

Located at Loops 101 and 202, Tempe Marketplace sits on what once was the site of three landfills. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency declared it a hazardous-waste site and added it to the Superfund list in 1983 because industrial solvents were thought to have contaminated the groundwater. The site was removed from the Superfund list 20 years later and opened for development when it was determined the trash there produced little other than methane.

Mall staff and patrons who remember those days say they're surprised to see the transformation now that the development is nearly complete.

Take, for instance, security guard Shelly Graham, 53, of Phoenix, who said she's glad to see joggers at the mall in the mornings and young people hanging out at the entertainment venues. The grand opening really is a reason to party, she said.

"I am looking forward to it," she said. "I like to see positive progress in Tempe."

Marty De Rito is the developer of the \$400 million Mesa Riverview mixed-use development about a mile away from Tempe Marketplace. He also is enthusiastic about the opening and says he isn't concerned about increased competition.

"It won't take customers away - it will bring more shoppers to the intersection" of Loops 101 and 202, De Rito said.

"Combined there is 2.5 million square feet of retail space and both projects are going to draw people from 10 miles away or more."

For younger generations, the mall's live concerts, movie theater, arcade and restaurants make Tempe Marketplace a one-stop destination for a night out on the town, not just shopping.

"Everything we need is basically right here," said Arizona State University undergraduate Jason Summers, 19.

If patrons at today's grand opening come to that same conclusion, Tempe Marketplace will have lived up to its slogan: "It's not a mall; it's a destination."