



## CUSTOMERS, MERCHANTS EAGER TO WEIGH IN ON MALL REDEVELOPMENT PLANS



Sketches on display inside the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza show how developers envision a planned overhaul. (Photo by Leiloni De Gruy)

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**CRENSHAW DISTRICT** — Construction is not set to begin for some time, but investors say the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza is closer than ever to receiving improvements they believe will transform not just the mall but also the surrounding area.

Today, a 20-foot-long display located near the lower-level food court gives mall visitors a glimpse into future redevelopment plans on the 43-acre property. Artists' renderings portray an open-air concept with courtyards, movie theaters and storefronts visible from both Crenshaw and Martin Luther King Jr. boulevards.

Initial work will consist of revitalizing the enclosed center, with a heavy focus on modernizing existing storefronts. Over time, additional retail stores, restaurants and venues would be added. The plaza will not be closed during the renovation and will operate as normal.

Redevelopment plans for the surrounding area include new residential development, a hotel and commercial office space. Tree-lined sidewalks and other streetscape improvements will not only complement work under the Crenshaw Transit Corridor plan, but link pedestrians to a proposed light rail.

The transformation will take a number of years and hundreds of millions of dollars, said Ken Lombard, a partner with Capri Capital, which owns the mall with other investors. "It is fully anticipated that the investment dollars needed to fund this will come from our Capri Urban Fund," he said, "that was put together and actually funded the acquisition of the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza."

With this project, however, they expect a dramatic economic boost for the area. One benefit would be job creation, said Lombard. Construction work alone, a representative added, could employ more than 1,000. Hundreds of other jobs would be permanent, mainly those operating the mall and occupying the nearby office space and hotel.

Another benefit would be producing more business for those stores already in the mall. Patrick Gallagher, manager of the shoe and apparel store Underground Station, does not expect immediate gains, but was hopeful about the future. "It's not going to happen for a while," he said. "I think when it does it's going to look great and hopefully it will bring more business, bring this area up and be more appealing to consumers." As it currently stands, the mall "is old," he added. When held up against recent renovations at the Westfield mall in nearby Culver City, Gallagher said "this looks like a swap meet."

Mark Purifor, manager of the Bakers shoe store, said "anything that will revitalize business is good."

David, a Radio Shack manager who declined to give his last name, is confident the redevelopment will provide businesses in the mall with an infusion of customers and sales that he "is looking forward to." The open-air concept, he noted, would not only be more appealing but also spare new customers the guesswork of figuring out what stores are in the shopping center.

Capri and the BHCP redevelopment team have already begun reaching out to shoppers. For five weeks in December and January, representatives staffed the customer service booth near the food court to answer questions, get feedback and distribute reading materials. Thus far, according to a representative, more than 1,500 signatures in support of the project have been collected.

But not everyone is so optimistic. Sharon Willis has "been hearing that the mall was going to be improved years ago," she said. "I was excited then, but that has now worn off. There has been a lot of lip service and no action. I just hope that they keep their commitment to this community and do what they say they are going to do. I hope it doesn't take them another 10 years to make this happen. People in this community deserve better and deserve to have a place they can go close to home."

A draft environmental impact report on the project is expected to be released in the next several months, with public hearings set for later this year. The next step will be improvements to the existing businesses.

"We have a tremendous community with a tremendous amount of not only buying power but vibrancy and they deserve the best options available," said Lombard. "It will really provide a first-class shopping experience for members of the community."