

DEVELOPMENT

RESHAPING THE SKYLINE

Willow Valley proposes tallest building in county, housing people 55 and up



This rendering shows the Willow Valley Mosaic high-rise from the level of South Queen Street in Lancaster city. Southern Market Center appears in the foreground.

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Willow Valley Communities on Monday announced plans to develop a 20-story apartment building in downtown Lancaster, across the street from Southern Market Center.

The 244-foot-high building would be the tallest in Lancaster County, surpassing the 19-floor Lancaster Marriott at Penn Square a block away by 34 feet.

Named Willow Valley Mosaic, with an estimated cost exceeding \$90 million, the upscale development would consist of 147 apartments as well as a host of resort-quality amenities for its residents, who would be ages 55 and up.

Mosaic also would include two restaurants and several small stores that would be open to the public.

Depending on how quickly the project moves through the city approval process and how fast the apartments attract financial commitments from future residents, Mosaic could open as soon as 2025.

"We think there's going to be strong demand," said John Swanson, CEO of Willow Valley Living, which manages Willow Valley Communities. "There's nothing like this on the East Coast."

Marshall Snively, president of the Lancaster City Alliance, a nonprofit that works to strengthen the city economy, sees Mosaic spinning off a wide spectrum of positive impacts.

"We are very excited to see a signature project of this caliber bring life to this key intersection, bring residents to utilize our local shops, restaurants and cultural institutions while adding to the city's evolving skyline," he said.

The alliance and the city identified that corner as a prime site for high-density redevelopment five years ago, according to Snively. But Willow Valley wasn't aware of that designation until after it identified the parcel, Swanson said.

Chris Delfs, the city's director of community planning and economic development, echoed Snively's enthusiasm for the project, saying Mosaic would be "an economic engine in the downtown."

Still a shortage

Mosaic joins seven other significant housing projects in downtown and on the edge of downtown that are proposed or under construction. These other ventures total 743 units, as developers take advantage of low interest rates to respond to a housing shortage. Still, there's a need for more; in 2015, the alliance and the city set a goal of 2,500 new housing units citywide by 2030.

These proposed buildings include Queen Street Apartments, a 16-story structure at North Queen and West Chestnut streets. At 198 feet tall, it would be the third tallest building in the county. Assuming the Queen Street Apartments and Mosaic both are built, the Griest Building on Penn Square would get bumped down to fourth largest, at 192 feet and 14 floors.

Willow Valley's announcement comes a year and a half after it had disclosed its intentions to develop a downtown campus, its first residential project outside its Willow Street campus 4 miles away, where it has developed or planned buildings on its entire acreage.

In June 2019, Willow Valley said it was eyeing the northwest corner of South Queen and West Vine streets, where the former LNP production building sits. Willow Valley also said it would help revitalize the nearly vacant Southern Market building too, in a joint effort with nonprofit Lancaster Equity.

At that time, though, details were few. Willow Valley said only that it envisioned a building with about 150 apartments whose residents and staff would park at the Steinman Park Garage next door. Now Willow Valley has introduced a sweeping, detailed plan for the highly visible corner.

Mosaic's spacious apartments, all of them two or three bedrooms, would range in size from 1,600 to 3,300 square feet. Besides the restaurants and stores, amenities would include rooftop gardening and dogrun areas, a wine cellar and tasting room, a ballroom and a small movie theater, among others.

In addition, Mosaic's amenities would be available to residents at Willow Valley's main campus. And amenities at the main campus, such as its Cultural Center and Clubhouse, would be open to Mosaic residents. Continuous, free shuttle

service would link the two locations.

Mosaic's entrance fees and monthly fees remain to be determined, Swanson said.

Residents of Mosaic would be able to enjoy a revitalized Southern Market too, which is getting a food hall, coworking offices, artist/maker spaces, stores and a business incubator. Some of the new uses are set to become available in late 2021.

"Viewed together, these two projects will bring a remarkable number of community benefits," Delfs said.

Upward bound

Offering so many amenities makes Mosaic's exceptional height a necessity, Swanson said. To cover the cost of the amenities, Willow Valley needs the revenue generated by about 150 apartments. And to get that many apartments on a 1.5-acre property, Willow Valley has to build up, not out.

The city Zoning Hearing Board has allowed the unique height, approving Willow Valley's request for a variance to go 94 feet above the 150-foot height limit spelled out in the city zoning ordinance.

The payoffs go beyond amenities. The community comes out ahead too, he said, because redeveloping an urban property helps the county preserve its precious open space.

Mosaic would bring a positive economic impact to the community as well, according to Swanson.

It would create approximately 100 to 125 jobs, add about 260 residents to center-city who would patronize its stores, restaurants and venues, and boost the tax base, benefiting the city, county and School District of Lancaster.

While Willow Valley is a nonprofit, Swanson said the rules for attaining tax-exempt status are "extensive." He added, "We choose to pay real estate taxes and not challenge that." Swanson did not have an estimate of Mosaic's property tax bill.

The CEO declined to disclose the total cost of developing the Mosaic. However, the cost of other high-rise projects suggests the Mosaic's price tag would exceed \$90 million.

As was previously reported, Willow Valley would raze the former production building where LNP once printed its daily newspaper (it is now printed in Greenfield) and other former LNP facilities on the site. However, the historic former home of attorney and judge Jasper Yeates on the tract would be preserved. It was built in 1765-66.

Urban living

Swanson sees Mosaic appealing to people who want to live in an urban, walkable environment that offers many attractive destinations such as restaurants, entertainment venues, art galleries, stores and Lancaster Central Market.

He's not deterred by the fact that COVID-19 has depressed the center-city scene in 2020 and will do so for much of 2021, if not longer; he's optimistic that downtown will recover in time.

And there's an abundance of that between now and Mosaic's projected opening.

Swanson figures that by the time Mosaic wins its city approvals, and Mosaic gets enough commitments from future residents to make Willow Valley comfortable with starting construction — the threshold is 100 apartments — it would be late 2022.

Construction of the 481,000-square-foot building, with as much floor space as nine football fields, would take 30 to 36 months. That would lead to its 2025 opening.

Attractive destinations outside and appealing amenities inside wouldn't be Mosaic's only assets.

As a Willow Valley community, Mosaic would have another popular attribute — residents would have lifecare contracts, Swanson said. Lifecare contracts guarantee that if residents ever need personal care, skilled care or memory care, they get it for their existing monthly fee.

Compatible concept

Though Mosaic would stand out for its size, location and features, Willow Valley is making a concerted effort to have the structure fit in visually as much as possible.

The Mosaic, designed by San Francisco-based architectural firm Gensler, would have mostly glass on its exterior, as does 101NQ (the former Bulova building at North Queen and East Orange streets) and the downtown Marriott's new annex.

"We believe we've selected materials that will not only fit (into downtown) but will be timeless. We're not necessarily looking to use materials that today are trendy. We believe we've selected materials that will be elegant, timeless and play well with the surrounding buildings," Swanson said.

Gensler also has configured the building to soften the visual impact of its height on pedestrians, Swanson said. The portions closest to the street would be two or three stories, he said, establishing a buffer between the tower and the sidewalk. Street-level terraces on the Mosaic's east and west sides, as well as the street-level restaurant's outdoor dining area, would have a similar effect, he said.

Swanson and Gensler design director Lester Yuen presented an overview of Mosaic on Monday evening to the city Historical Commission, which advises City Council on whether to approve proposals for construction or demolition in the city's Heritage Conservation District, where the Mosaic site is located.

The presentation was strictly for discussion purposes. No advisory vote was taken. A vote will be taken at a later meeting, after Willow Valley has the opportunity to tweak its plan.

Several commission members expressed



This rendering shows a 20-story, \$90 million apartment building that Willow Valley Communities is proposing to develop at South Queen and West Vine streets. The high-rise, to be named Willow Valley Mosaic, would be the tallest building in Lancaster County. At right is the Griest Building.

concern about Mosaic residents adding traffic to an already congested West Vine Street, but Swanson said he expects Mosaic residents to travel mostly at off-peak hours.

Several members also wondered about the visual impact of what commission chair Christopher Peters called "20 floors of glass." Commission member Steven Funk said Mosaic would be "Lancaster's first glass box."

Commission member Eric Berman responded that he had no problem with it. "I think it's very exciting. What's wrong with a glass box? It's refreshing. I think it's terrific."