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MILL VALLEY RETAIL-HOUSING PROJECT MAKING HEADWAY

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The large construction site looming along the southern end of Miller Avenue in Mill Valley has locals talking about what it bodes for future development in the city.

At the construction mid-point of the 32,000-square-foot Tamalpais Commons, a multi-story mix of 21 housing units and retail space at 505 Miller Ave., developers have started lining up commercial tenants. City leaders and residents were taking a wait-and-see approach on the finished product, expected at the end of this year.

“It’s looking a little massive now, but it’s not done yet,” Councilwoman Shawn Marshall said. “It’s a good test case for us to see how it goes.”

Property owner Mike House, of Mill Valley, said he’s had mostly favorable reaction to the project.

Construction began late last year after numerous public hearings and meetings since the idea was first floated in 2004.

“I’m sure in Mill Valley, which is an anti-growth town, there are people that don’t care for it too,” he said.

House said one restaurant that he would only describe as “a good, local operator” signed to take up half of the 5,500 square feet of retail space. He was working with other interested commercial tenants and said he hoped to have that portion leased by the end of August.

“People have been very receptive to the commercial (space) considering this market,” House said. “It’s a good location.”

House said he has a waiting list of more than 50 people for housing units that include four 1,020 square-foot live-work lofts in the two-story building over the retail space, 12 single-family homes and five ground-floor units in a building back from Miller Avenue. The project will offer five affordable housing units.

Though all housing units are planned to be rentals, that may change in the future. “When the real estate market starts to rebound, we will contemplate selling at that time,” said Kristin Silmore, a spokeswoman for Mill Valley-based House Properties.

The project also touts an environmental focus including Build It Green certification, photovoltaic power and permeable paving and landscaping designed to filter rainwater to Arroyo Corte Madera del Presidio Creek.

Councilwoman Stephanie Moulton-Peters wasn't on the council when the development was approved, but was familiar with the community outreach by House.

"The project just about works," she said, though noting, "It's a little large and a little closer to the street for my preference."

Moulton-Peters said community feedback has been mixed, with some people concerned it is too large while others are OK with the building size. Some people, she said, are reserving judgment until construction and landscaping is finished.

"Everybody is kind of holding their breath in town," Moulton-Peters said. "This is going to be a touchstone for the city. Going forward, we need to be really careful going up Miller Avenue to make sure we get the size and setback right" for future development, she said.

Mill Valley resident Susan Kirsch, part of the citizens' group Friend of Mill Valley that formed over concerns about efforts to renovate Miller Avenue, said "if this is the model for the new look Mill Valley was planning, it really does change the face of the city."

Kirsch said though she was pleased with the way the site was taking shape, she also was grateful it was the only such development going forward – for now.

"We're all kind of waiting to see how it all plays out with that kind of density," she said. "We're being hopeful to look and learn from what happens with this project before there's more moving forward with other projects on Mill Valley."