

Welcome to Convoy: 30-foot sign coming soon to trendy San Diego neighborhood

By Jennifer Van Grove

San Diego's Convoy District, a commercial area in transition, will soon have on permanent display a sign of its status as one of San Diego's up-and-coming neighborhoods.

Thursday, city leaders joined the not-for-profit Asian Business Association Foundation to celebrate the coming-soon debut of a long-anticipated Convoy Gateway sign, now on track to be constructed before the end of the year.

The 30-foot, vertical structure, which will be installed on the median at Opportunity Road and Convoy Street in Kearny Mesa, is made possible by \$1.5 million in funds contributed by the city of San Diego, a sum that includes \$500,000 from the just-approved budget for the upcoming fiscal year.

The sign will mark the maturation — and continued potential of — a cultural hub and popular Asian food destination with a reputation that has organically supplanted the town's industrial roots.

"The hundreds of locally owned businesses in the Convoy District have worked hard to make this neighborhood the exciting hub it is today," Mayor Todd Gloria said in a statement. "The new Gateway sign recognizes that work and serves as an iconic marker that will welcome both residents and visitors to the neighborhood. This is an important milestone in the Convoy Street corridor's continued revitalization, which includes new homes, repaved streets, additional parking and more."

The triangular corridor unofficially known as the Convoy District is generally considered to be bounded by Interstate 805, California State Route 52, Interstate 163 and where Convoy Street becomes Linda Vista Road.

In the 1980s and 90s, Asian-owned small businesses — a mix of restaurants, small grocers, doctor and dentist offices — cropped up along Convoy Street, with entrepreneurs drawn to the area because of the low rents offered at strip malls. In 2020, the area was officially named by the city as the Convoy Pan Asian Cultural and Business Innovation District, a designation that also paved the way for the installation of a gateway sign.

Now the business- and car-centric part of town is due for an extreme home makeover with developers already taking advantage of zoning changes in the recently updated Kearny Mesa community plan.

The forward-looking blueprint, adopted in November 2020, seeks to create a more balanced, pedestrian-friendly community with the expected addition of more than 20,000 homes. The Convoy Corridor in particular, which follows Convoy Street from Ronson Road to Ostrow Street, is to

be refashioned in the style of Little Italy, where residential towers intermix with ground-floor shops, plazas and paseos to create a vibrant atmosphere.

As it stands, 3,289 residential units are in the development pipeline, according to high-level project information shared by the city.

Developer Trammell Crow Residential, for instance, is ready to start construction on Alexan Camellia, a 531-unit apartment complex with ground-floor shopkeeper units at 4888 Convoy Street. The 5-acre site was the former home of Dixieline Lumber and is located in the heart of the cultural commercial destination.

In addition, Los Angeles-based real estate firm G.H. Palmer Associates last year purchased the nearly 14-acre, Clairemont Mesa Boulevard site that includes Zion Market and a bowling alley for \$165 million and is planning to build 1,641 units.

The Convoy Gateway sign is meant as a calling card that continues to elevate the district's profile.

Design and installation of the sign is being managed by the Asian Business Association Foundation, which entered into a compensation agreement with the city in February. The group is also responsible for sign upkeep and median maintenance.

"Our community has been talking about (the Convoy sign) for about a decade ... but there was no mechanism to really fund something like this," said Jason Paguio, who is president and CEO of the foundation. " (Plans) accelerated throughout the pandemic because we thought (the gateway sign) could drive tourism to the area and remind people of the contributions of our community."

The vertical design, distinct from horizontal archways in other neighborhoods, is intended to reflect how Asian languages are written vertically in columns, he said.

Work on the sign is expected to start this fall, a spokesperson for the group said. The \$1.5 million budget includes \$600,000 for building and construction of the sign, said Christina Bibler, who runs the city's economic development department. Additional funds will cover installation costs including median repair, she said.

