

Project will add 531 apartments to San Diego's Convoy District — where there are none today



Trammell Crow Residential will build a six-story, 531-unit residential project along Convoy Street in Kearny Mesa, introducing homes to an area that was previously zoned for commercial use only. (Courtesy, JWDA Architects)

By Jennifer Van Grove

San Diego's Convoy District, a bustling neighborhood celebrated for its wide assortment of locally owned Pan-Asian eateries and shops, is currently lacking the key ingredient required to make it a thriving community: homes. A first-of-its-kind project from developer Trammell Crow Residential opens the door to a new reality, one in which area business owners, workers and patrons can also be residents.

The developer is working to permit a 531-unit apartment complex with ground-floor shopkeeper units along Convoy Street, between Raytheon Road and Ronson Road in Kearny Mesa — right in the heart of the cultural commercial destination.

Trammell Crow anticipates starting construction later this year and leasing units in early 2025.

The project will mark the first residences of any kind along Convoy Street and will serve as the first multi-family project in the broader triangular corridor unofficially known as the Convoy District. The

territory is generally considered to be bounded by Interstate 805, California State Route 52, Interstate 163 and where Convoy Street becomes Linda Vista Road. Currently, the expanse has just two residential communities, a mobile home park and a small, single-family neighborhood butting up against Interstate 805.

Trammel Crow plans to redevelop roughly five acres of land currently home to a now-vacant Dixieline Lumber store and its parking lot at 4888 Convoy Street. The site, which the developer expects to acquire from property owner Merlone Geier Management, includes the office building at 7700 Ronson Road. Merlone Geier purchased the parcels, and a neighboring retail strip with a Starbucks drive-thru, for \$31 million in January of 2020.

The project includes six stories of residential units wrapped around an above-ground parking structure, two pools and a fitness center. There will be 22 affordable units deed-restricted for very low-income families making 50 percent or less of the area median income. The developer also plans to include 13 shopkeeper units, meaning live-work units with higher ceilings and external ground floor access.

Community advocates view the forthcoming multi-family housing project as a potential harbinger for an entirely new neighborhood, inspired by Little Italy, that builds on its roots with residential towers that support ground-floor shops, introduce pedestrian-friendly plazas and paseos, and create a dynamic cultural destination.

"(Convoy) is big part of my life — it's always been a special place for (San Diego's Asian community), but perhaps not to other folks," said Tim Nguyen, who is co-board president of the nonprofit Convoy District Partnership and works in real estate development. Trammell Crow's project acts as a stamp of approval to the area, he said. "It says, Convoy is a real area, it's a big attraction and we're backing it up with real capital."

The multi-family residential development was made possible by housing-centric land-use changes in the recently overhauled Kearny Mesa Community Plan. The plan was adopted in November 2020 and anticipates a population of 62,096 people (up from 10,400 people) at build out in 2050. The forward-looking blueprint designates the site, and others like it, as a high-density employment village and allows up to 109 units per acre. The previous community plan designated the site as general commercial, which did not allow for housing.

"Restaurant owners and entrepreneurs in the Convoy District have created a distinct reputation for its commerce, cuisine and culture. As the community grows, the new Kearny Mesa Community Plan provides a focus for people to live in homes near stores, restaurants and closer to their work, which this development proposes," said Tara Lewis, who is a spokesperson for San Diego's planning department.

The former zoning was in keeping with Kearny Mesa's origins as an employment center, where aeronautical research, manufacturing businesses, defense contractors and electronics companies took hold in 1960s. The 1980s and 90s, however, saw the establishment of Asian-owned small businesses along Convoy Street — restaurants, small grocers, doctor and dentist offices — with

entrepreneurs drawn to the area because of the low rents offered at strip malls.

Today a second generation of business owners has expanded the naturally occurring district's influence and reach, which now extends well beyond the main street. Additionally, Asian entrepreneurs from Los Angeles, San Francisco and Vancouver are choosing to expand their operations in the Convoy District, Nguyen said.

And Menya Ultra, a Japanese import, opened its first stateside noodle shop on Clairemont Mesa Boulevard in 2017. The ramen restaurant received a Michelin Plate award last year.

"Convoy is probably the largest (collection) of Pan-Asian businesses anywhere in America," Nguyen said.

In 2020, the area was officially named by the city as the Convoy Pan Asian Cultural and Business Innovation District, with the designation allowing the Convoy District Partnership to install an arch over Convoy Street. More recently, the business association successfully raised \$30,000 for freeway signs to announce the somewhat hidden gem to motorists. The signs are expected to be installed later this year.

"As a San Diego native, the development of the Convoy corridor is very special to me. The area conjures countless memories of good times spent with friends and family enjoying the amazing restaurants. To me, it's one of the most unique places in San Diego, but it is still in the infancy of its potential," said Alec Schiffer, who is managing director for Trammell Crow Residential. "I am so excited for what this area will become. The components are already there: freeway access, job accessibility, a fantastic community plan, and the food and beverage scene."

