

By *BRUCE JOHNSTONE* Leader-Post

Grasslands to include a 'mixed-use urban village'

Grasslands, the commercial real estate development located south of Harbour Landing in southwest Regina, will establish several firsts for the city and province.

"Grasslands is a first for Regina in a bunch of different ways," said Blair Forster, vicepresident of development for Harvard Developments, which is developing the 86-acre site.

For starters, Grasslands is the "first largescale, master-planned" commercial real estate project in the city, he said.

The massive commercial development on the east side of the city was "developed by many people over many years," Forster said. As a result, the east side has a hodge-podge of strip malls, big box retailers and conventional shopping malls. "It's a little disjointed," Forster said. Not only does Grasslands have a master plan, it has architectural controls "that deal with architecture, landscape, sidewalks," Forster said.

Unlike most suburban 'power centres,' where shoppers drive from one parking lot to another, Grasslands will be pedestrian friendly.

"The project, when complete, is going to be walkable. That's a very, very important aspect to us and the City of Regina," Forster said.

In fact, Forster says "each and every storefront in that project is connected ... by a series of walkways, so you don't have to jump in your car and drive across the street, if you choose not to."

But no commercial development project, no matter how well designed, will attract shoppers without good anchor tenants. And Grasslands boasts great anchor tenants, Forster said.

"The way these projects build momentum and develop is... with your anchor tenants," he said. The 185,000-square-foot Walmart Supercentre — the first in Regina and second in Saskatchewan — got the ball rolling when it opened its doors last month.

Forster said Walmart is enjoying a 50-per-cent increase in customer traffic since moving from its former location at the Southland Mall. And Walmart appears to be pleased with the move to Grasslands, as well.

“Walmart Canada is delighted to be the first large retailer to open in what will clearly become a retail hub in Regina south,” said Susan Schutta, director of corporate affairs for Walmart Canada.

Schutta repeated Walmart’s pledge to “save Canadians money so they can live better. Based on the strong traffic we see in our new supercentre, this is a commitment that resonates with Regina residents.”

The other major anchor tenant, which was announced on Thursday, is Lowe’s home improvement centre. The \$20-million, 103,000-square-foot big box store, with 32,000-square-foot garden centre, will be the first in the province.

Forster said the two anchor tenants, plus a hotel (Day’s Inn), Co-op gas bar, food service, fashion stores and banking facilities (Royal Bank), round out the first phase of the project.

“Now you’ve created a destination (shop) for the area,” which will be completed late this fall, Forster said.

The second phase of Grasslands will see “junior box” stores fill in some of the gaps. “Those tenants are a little more pioneering, so they will follow ... the anchor tenants.”

Finally, the third phase of Grasslands — “the jewel of this project” — is what Harvard is calling the “mixed-use urban village,” Forster said. “That’s the part of the project that is very pedestrian-scale, a town centre with two-storey buildings framing it.”

The third phase will have “more fashion retail, higher-end dining opportunities, looking onto a highly programmed town square,” he said.

The village square will feature live entertainment in the summer, a skating rink in the winter, with soda pop fountains in the summer and fire pits in the winter, he said.

“Not only is that (village square) going to form the heart of Harbour Landing community ... I think it’s going to be a destination for the surrounding area.”

“It’s going to have a village feel to it. Through design and architecture and landscaping, you’ve got to give people a sense that they’ve travelled away a little bit.”

But Grasslands isn’t trying to replicate a Tyrolean village either. “It’s a celebration of our Saskatchewan heritage. You’re going to see — right from our signage to our landscaping, a lot of native and ornamental grasses,” Forster said.

“We want the project to be sustainable, so we’re using drought-resistant (plants). In the architecture, we’re trying to use natural stones that are native to

Saskatchewan. We're trying to go back to where this province evolved from over time. It's nostalgic.

"It's not going to be Disneyland. But it's going to feel comfortable to the people of this province."

When all is said and done, Grasslands will be one of the largest — if not the largest — commercial developments of its kind in the province.

When completed sometime in 2013 or 2014, the project will encompass one million square feet of retail space, including some office space and related "amenity" services.

Forster said the entire Grasslands project will cost about \$350 million to build. "That's the construction value of the buildings on site. With all the money the tenants will put into these buildings, it's huge."

But Forster isn't worried that the project is too big.

"We did a retail survey three years ago that showed Regina was deficient by about one million square feet of retail space in the southwest.

"So, even at full implementation in 2013 or 2014, we're still going to be at an imbalance. We're just filling a need that exists outside the downtown core."

And, unlike many property development companies, Harvard intends to manage the project after it's completed.

"Harvard's got a very long-term vision for its involvement in this community. The reason we spend a little bit more money and agonize over architectural controls and sustainability initiatives (is), we're going to own this project in perpetuity.

"We're not a merchant builder. We're not building this to sell it ... to a pension fund. We're going to own it and it's going to stay in the company for ... the foreseeable future."