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East Bay developer Jim Ellis leads revival of Oakland's Jack London Square [Contra Costa Times]

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"I saw what happened with City Center and how transformational development could be for downtown Oakland," said Ellis, one of the principal executives with Ellis Partners. "That really inspired me."

Now the scene has shifted some blocks away, to Jack London Square. Once again, a developer named Ellis has begun to orchestrate a project that could change the face of downtown Oakland.

Jack London Square is undergoing a \$400 million revival that is bringing to the waterfront new restaurants, entertainment, retail, offices, a hotel and parking. Ellis Partners, which Jim Ellis cofounded with his father and sister Melinda Ellis Evers, is the principal owner and developer of the project, which Ellis says will transform the waterfront.

"We are creating a regional dining district," Ellis said during a tour of the project. "There is a food-centric movement going on in Oakland. Jack London Square is a part of that."

Old standbys at Jack London Square like Barnes & Noble have vanished from the scene. In their places are go-go enterprises such as upstart solar installer Sungevity.

"The idea is to make this a 24/7, vibrant district," Ellis said. "You need it to have weekday and daytime workers. You need people living here. We want it to be active all the time. We want this place to be a destination."

New restaurants have sprouted at Jack London Square, including Bocanova, Hahn's Hibachi, Haven and Miss Pearl's Restaurant & Lounge. The Forge, a pizza and artisan beer establishment, will open next year.

"There is a big lunch crowd, a lot of traffic in here at night, and weekends are busy as well," Ellis said, who decided to populate Jack London Square with restaurants and merchants that can't be found elsewhere.

"We want unique concepts," he said. "We don't want to be like every other retail project."

To be sure, some longtime restaurants such as Scott's Seafood are part of a chain. But most of the others are unique to Jack London Square.

"All of the restaurants that we have opened are doing really well," Ellis said. "It's a testament to the emerging dining scene in Oakland."

Ellis Partners undertook a similar makeover using one-of-a-kind restaurants at Palo Alto's Town & Country Village in 2004. Ellis added Calafia Cafe, whose chef was the leading chef at the Googleplex; and Howie's Artisan Pizza, touted as a more healthy approach to that popular dish.

"We sometimes recruit people and build a new business or a concept around them," Ellis said. "It is can be painstaking and time-consuming. It takes a lot of patience. But it is working."

One of those recruits is Rick Hackett, owner of Bocanova, a restaurant that features cuisines of North, Central and South America.

"Jim Ellis believed in me," Hackett said. "He had a vision of Jack London Square that I believed in and that I still believe in."

Tenants with the development say they can see the improvement.

"Jim is really dedicated to Jack London Square," said Susan Hollingshead, vice president of people at Sungevity, which has its headquarters in the development. "He has been pushing this project forward, through thick and thin."

Ellis acknowledges that the brutal economy has hobbled some elements of the square, notably Jack London Market.

The complex is envisioned as a public market featuring fruits, vegetables, meat, seafood, coffee, baked goods, cheese and prepared foods. It is expected to be a place to dine and shop. For now, Ellis is seeking permanent tenants for the public market. An outdoor farmers market awaits a critical mass of tenants.

"But we are starting to see some encouraging signs," Ellis said.

Other unfinished business is a site for retail and office space and a 250-room hotel at the east end of the project. The timing of these developments is unclear.

During a stroll through the square, Ellis recalled a spot where he played as a child. He also noticed Heinold's First and Last Chance Saloon, where he drank his first beer. Born and raised in the East Bay, and now living in Piedmont, he sees the connections from the past to his endeavors of the present.

"I was born to do this," Ellis said. "I caught my passion for development from my father. He was a great father and mentor. We can change perceptions about Oakland. That is a challenge. But it's also an opportunity."

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