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Outbreak hasn't derailed this College Park development project

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A partnership including the Greenbelt-based Bozzuto Development Co. is set to break ground on its \$140 million redevelopment of a site south of the University of Maryland's front door in College Park where Plato's Diner and a Quality Inn hotel once stood.

The team, which includes the university-backed Terrapin Development Co. and Willard Retail, gave work crews notice March 27 to proceed at 7150 Baltimore Ave. after locking in the regulatory approvals and financing needed to move forward earlier this year. It will be one of the first new projects to break ground in Greater Washington since the coronavirus outbreak hit the region.

"I think everything came together at the right time," said Ken Ulman, president of Terrapin Development and chief strategy officer for economic development at the University of Maryland, College Park Foundation. "We were eyes wide open, paying attention to the governor's orders on essential businesses, paying attention to the financial markets, having constant conversations with our partners about this, and, absolutely, there was a sense of anxiety about this project and it being ready to start."

Even without the ceremonial, gold-plated shovels of a formal groundbreaking, which still might happen virtually, being able to move ahead was an important moral victory after several years of prep, Ulman said. University officials hope the mixed-use development will build upon momentum gained through other projects in Greater College Park, and Baltimore Avenue as its main spine. The site, on Baltimore Avenue between Calvert Road and Guilford Drive, sits at the southern gateway to that corridor, and the university picked the Bozzuto-backed partnership in 2016 to redevelop the 4.5-acre property as part of that larger vision.

Officials in D.C., Maryland and Virginia have deemed construction an essential business amid the outbreak, even as restrictions in other parts of the country silenced backhoes and construction cranes. That's been a lifeline mostly for those projects that were already under construction locally, but starting new developments has been a heavier lift because of the additional approvals and financing. Still, the team worked through final regulatory hurdles in time to receive its grading permits late last month to start work.

The team was gearing up to start work this spring, as *The Diamondback*, the student newspaper of the University of Maryland reported in February — but that was then. The coronavirus outbreak has shut down or bogged down so many things since, and the team was left pushing remotely for approvals for some of the final pieces of the project, which was designed by Design Collective and is slated to include a grocer, fitness center and nearly 400 luxury apartment units. That included the follow-through on a record plat that had been approved by the Prince George's County planning board in February. It was needed before the team could secure the grading permits it needed to break ground, said Jeff Kayce, senior vice president and managing director of the D.C. region for Bozzuto Development.

Precautions tied to the coronavirus will force contractors to proceed more slowly than they might otherwise, but Kayce said he hopes the threat will ease as the development progresses and the project's labor force increases to keep up with that pace. Bozzuto Construction Co. has been retained as the general contractor, Streetsense as its interior designer, LandDesign as its landscape architect, and Bohler Engineering as its civil engineer. Bozzuto Management Co. will manage the property, and KLN B will oversee retail leasing.



COURTESY DESIGN COLLECTIVE

The mixed-use project at 7150 Baltimore Ave. is slated to include a fitness center, grocer, and nearly 400 luxury apartment units.

"Construction today remains an essential service as we build homes here, and for that reason, while progress might be slightly less efficient than it likely would be under a fully staffed methodology, we feel good that this early-stage of construction is perfectly suited to the conditions we're in," Kayce said. "Folks are able to perform their work with very significant distancing from each other."

Like most of its peers, Bozzuto Construction has put together an executive task force that meets daily to ensure its employees have the most up-to-date information on safety measures, company spokeswoman Chintimini Keith said. All of its construction sites are operational, and the company is following guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Bozzuto has also drafted a guide for all of its site employees and subcontractors on how to maintain separation and minimize the potential spread of the coronavirus, with steps including proper cleaning and disinfecting, not sharing tools or protective gear, and prohibitions on workers congregating during lunch breaks.

Still, even getting to the point where it could seek grading permits has been a long road. The team needed the typical regulatory approvals as with any major mixed-use project, but it also sought extra buy-in from county and city officials in the form of a payment in lieu of taxes, a type of tax abatement program. Then there was the matter of financing the development, a step aided by the project's location in a federal Opportunity Zone. That positioned the team to attract about \$50 million in equity from JPMorgan Asset Management. Bank of America and PNC Financial Services have provided construction financing.

Kayce credits the projects' development partners and supporters, including the county, for helping to make the groundbreaking possible during such challenging times.

"Projects that are public-private partnerships typically take longer to execute due to multiple constituencies," Kayce said. "Thankfully, in this case, we had the good fortune to work extensively with the University of Maryland and Prince George's County. Furthermore, we are deeply engaged with the community to make sure this project was the most ideal fit for the neighborhood."

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