

Construction under way for expansion of Pittsburg landmark eatery

By Paul Bugarino

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PITTSBURG — Change is coming to a beloved downtown landmark, but the flavor of the New Mecca Cafe will stay the same.

Work has started on a project that will add much-needed space for patrons in a historic building next door to the Railroad Avenue restaurant.

When finished, the new New Mecca will feature a modern kitchen, a separate room for catering orders, additional indoor and outdoor seating and bathrooms that are accessible to the disabled, said Jim Miller, a local architect chosen by owners Guillermo "Bill" Muniz and his wife, Terry, as construction manager.

The primary goal is to preserve what makes the New Mecca unique: the familiarity of dishes like chilaquiles and bean dip and its quirky décor, which includes three large, historical murals and a bull with rolled cigarette in its mouth looking over the bar.

"It will be the same cooks, the same food, the same owners, even the smells will be the same; it will just be polished up a bit," Terry Muniz said.

Part of that polish includes air conditioning, replacing the lava rock on the facade of the building with tile, and utilizing a skylight that was concealed, Miller said.

The aim is to return the buildings to their initial states and utilize old nuances like tin roofs and tile floors, Miller explained last week as some walls were being taken off the Martinetti Building.

The project will not affect the cafe's goal to "keep doing the best we can for customers every single day," Guillermo said after the project was approved last summer.

Pittsburg dished out \$2.34 million in redevelopment money toward construction loans and facade improvements, saying the Mecca helps bring people to the community.

Stockton-based McFadden Construction was awarded the project in January with a low bid of \$1.575 million, Miller said.

The deal included swapping the Pittsburg-owned Martinetti property for property the Munizes own on the block — part of a long-term city plan to redevelop the block.



Elevation of the New Mecca Cafe

Terry Muniz said having construction under way is like "seeing the light at the end of the tunnel."

Among the features she's most looking forward to are a better kitchen and more space for customers to sit down and maneuver around the cafe.

Guillermo was in Mexico last week, but Terry said "he's been impatient," given how plans have changed and the process has taken a long time. Several proposals to move the cafe were explored during the past few years.

The expansion will happen in two phases. The Martinetti building will be renovated, and the new kitchen and seating will be added. That building would open for service, and the existing Mecca will close and be retrofit. The entire project should take about a year to complete, Miller said.

Pittsburg also will work on a separate project this summer to widen the sidewalk around Railroad Avenue and Third Street. The road can be narrowed to one lane because there isn't much traffic there, assistant city manager Joe Sbranti said. The sidewalk space will allow for outdoor seating.

The New Mecca has been a Pittsburg fixture since the mid-1960s. Customers say they return to the restaurant because of the memories and the food.

"I'm really happy it's finally going to happen," said Karen Goodbar, of Pittsburg, while snacking on chips and salsa in a worn booth with friend Esther Campbell.

"It does need to be modernized, but we're glad it's staying," added Campbell, of Pittsburg.

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