

The Gadsden Times

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River Trace Shopping Center ground breaking to be held this month

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Activity at the site of the planned River Trace Shopping Center will begin soon, a representative of the developer said Tuesday.

John Abernathy, director of development and leasing for Blackwater Resources, told the Gadsden City Council that the firm has gotten the necessary permits to begin work, adding, "By next week you will see trailers and equipment starting to come on that site."

Blackwater plans a 200,000-square-foot development at the location of the former River Trace Golf Course off Meighan Boulevard in East Gadsden.

Abernathy said a ground-breaking ceremony will be held in about two weeks.

Several council members asked about the grass at the property being cut, and Abernathy said the grass will be "ripped up" very soon.

He told the council that stores would open at the development "between June and August" of next year. He would not say which stores will locate there, indicating those announcements would have to come from the stores themselves. In an interview after the meeting, he said some of those announcements could come this fall.

Abernathy said the development will have national retailers ranging in size from 10,000 square feet to 50,000 square feet. He expects the development to include 15 to 20 businesses with six to eight larger stores.

He said there has been more interests from "fast food" restaurants than "sit down" restaurants.

The City Council approved an agreement with River Trace Ventures, the limited liability company developing the property, and Grissom Family Properties, which owns the property, to extend Sixth Street as an entrance for the development. That street led to the former golf course's clubhouse.

Under the agreement, the city will pay one-third of the cost of the improvements, up to \$200,000.

There will be also an entrance at Fifth Street that Blackwater will be improving, and another one between Fifth and Sixth streets.

Gadsden Commercial Development Authority Director Lesa Osborn said there is little new development going on in Alabama and the U.S., with most of it concentrated on "backfilling" vacant space created by the economic downturn.

"We are very, very blessed to have this company come before us," she said of Blackwater.

Abernathy in the interview said Blackwater originally planned a first phase of

130,000 square feet, but now is considering making the first phase 180,000 square feet. That decision will be made in about two months.

“We've been pleasantly surprised that we may be able to do more in our first phase,” he said. “In some respects, it's come together slower since it's taken us longer to get to this point, which is not unusual with the economy. At the same time, we think we're going to be able to build more when we do actually get started.”

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