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Grant is sign Eden Prairie project is moving forward

Following a year-long holdup -- a side effect of the poor economic climate -- construction on an expansive \$200 million senior living facility in Eden Prairie now is slated to begin in the summer of 2011.

The size and scope of the project have not changed, though the timetable has been pushed back about a year. It still will cover a 21-acre swath of land overlooking the Purgatory Creek Recreation Area, with 447 units of senior housing, 260 units of all-ages housing and about 70,000 square feet of retail space for shops and restaurants. Reaching as high as 13 stories, it also will feature the city's tallest building.

Signaling that the project is moving forward was a recent \$848,300 Livable Communities grant from the Metropolitan Council. The grant will go toward design and engineering, street realignment and storm water management, essential steps in paving the way for construction. A total of \$4 million was distributed to eight projects in the region that are expected to unite housing, jobs and services.

City planners say the project's design is

consistent with their 25-year comprehensive plan to transform the area near Eden Prairie Center mall into a more urban, high-density setting complete with housing, transit services, private development and recreational amenities.

"It's aligned perfectly for the area," city planner Mike Franzen said.

The project is one of several of its kind by the St. Paul-based nonprofit Presbyterian Homes & Services.

"It will make a visual impact in that part of town, and we think a very positive one," said John Mehrkens, vice president of Senior Housing Partners, the development firm working on the facility.

The project's first phase, a CVS drug store, has been open for about a year. Construction on that began in 2008. The second phase, the senior housing component, is scheduled to begin construction in 2011. It is expected to take 18 months and open in 2013. Six months later, the all-ages housing and retail will go in, marking the end of the third and final phase.

Another component of the city's long-term vision is to add 3,500 housing units to the

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existing 1,500 in the area in an effort to build support for the surrounding retail, including the Eden Prairie mall, Franzen said. City plans also call for more seven- to 10-story high-rises and three- to six-story mid-rise buildings in the area.

Although it's a difficult time to get any new development up and running, Mehrkens said he's excited about the concept.

"The elements of the project are as valid today as when we got it approved two years ago," he said.

Tara Bannow is a University of Minnesota student on assignment for the Star Tribune.

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