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Durban's 'green city' forges ahead

The retail phase of the development is underway, including a high street space with 300 trees

Lyse Comins

Development of the R15 billion Westown "green city" in Shongweni, west of Durban, is moving swiftly ahead with the construction of a high street retail town square and a R730 million upgrade to roads and infrastructure now well underway.

Carlos Correia, chief executive officer of Fundamentum Property Group (FPG), the Durban company behind the development, said at an event to mark one year since builders broke ground on the site in August last year that piling, earthworks, retaining structures and columns of the 50 000m² retail phase, Westown Square, had been completed and the walls are going up.

Westown will be developed as a mixed-use precinct in a managed urban environment for which the developers have secured and approved development rights of

about 520 000m² of bulk floor area.

"The speed at which the development team is moving is testament to our unequivocal commitment to the long-term realisation of this ultimate R15 billion investment in eThekweni," Correia said.

"As the first development activity within the greater 100-hectare Westown development, Westown Square completely moves away from the mall concept.

"It brings together shopping, dining, living and recreation for all ages, with a national tenant mix enhanced by local niche offerings, all within a setting that reflects the unique character and energy of Shongweni."

Fundamentum purchased the total 1500 hectares of land, largely under sugarcane, from Tongaat Hulett several years ago.

The 100ha site currently under Phase 1 of the development is a hive of activity, with local contractors Stefanutti Stocks heading up the construction work, where about 500

people, two thirds of them from local communities, are working on site.

The developer has committed to retaining 30% of the site as green space and has undertaken to rehabilitate some of the land that was previously under sugarcane.

A total of 300 trees will be planted within the Westown Square precinct.

Correia said leasing of the retail space had "far exceeded our expectations" as 80% had already been let to national retailers and local and international fashion houses.

Absa is the primary funder of the R1.4 billion Westown Square.

eThekweni Municipality, in partnership with Fundamentum, is also investing R730 million to upgrade roads and other bulk infrastructure

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— including Kassier Road, which will become a four-lane thoroughfare — enabling developers to leverage a further R14 billion investment in the development over the next decade.

Absa chief executive for corporate and investment banking Charles Russon said the development would have a positive impact on the province and the local community.

"As business, we have a huge part to play in instilling hope and belief in this country and when you see what is happening today, and the beginning of that, it is a momentous occasion.

"I grew up down the road here 40 years ago and to come back and see how the region has changed and what is going on is so incredible," Russon said.

He said investments such as Westown are the "flagships" the province needs to encourage people to move back to it.

"We can only grow as a bank if the community grows and the country grows ... We want to be a part of the future of this country and this continent and we have to put our neck out and show our commitment to it and be a part of the solution and not part

of the problem," he said.

Fundamentum director Sean Bergsma said R4.5 billion had been committed to the development so far, the concept of which had been born as he and his partners watched the rapid growth in the north of Durban where multi-billion rand high-rise buildings and luxury apartments have drawn investors from across the country and internationally.

"We had a strong purpose many years back and that was to have a significant impact on the social and economic improvement of the west [of Durban].

"We watched on the sidelines of what was going on in the north and, as we watched the success of that, we knew we had something special out in the west and it is time now for the west," he said.

"Local is super important for us, it is a pillar of what we stand for and we want local businesses to think of how we can bring you into Westown, in the digital environment and the physical environment.

"I look forward to working with the local operators to grow their businesses in Westown."