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BODY:

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The Rio Nuevo project has been talked about for a long time, but now things are happening.

Rio Development Co. yesterday took the first visible action on the 14-acre parcel west of the Santa Cruz River along West Congress Street when workers used chain saws to topple several tamarisk trees on the property.

Bulldozers are scheduled to remove the tree trunks today.

The non-native trees, sometimes called salt cedars, were removed to make way for utilities and streets for the anticipated 274 housing units as well as several commercial properties planned for the site, called the Mercado District of Menlo Park, said Gale Marsland, project manager for the developer.

"There is actually dirt flying," Marsland said of the clearing effort. More dirt will fly in the next few months when streets are carved into the area that a century ago was the home of the Tucson Pressed Brick Co.

The brickyard was established to make bricks for Tucson's St. Augustine Cathedral. Bricks from the yard also went to several schools including Tucson High and Rincon High, several University of Arizona buildings and a few government buildings in Tucson.

Marsland said she didn't want people to interpret the tamarisk removal as lack of respect for trees.

Hundreds of native plants, such as paloverde, mesquite, ironwood and desert willow, many salvaged from the area, will be planted this fall along the streets "to give each area its own distinct look and feel."

The tamarisk, considered undesirable by environmentalists, has been the subject of government-sponsored eradication efforts in Arizona and New Mexico. The tree is said to have been brought into the arid regions of the nation about a century ago from Mediterranean regions but has gotten out of hand as it starves out Arizona's native plants.

Although the developer will make infrastructure improvements, five builders have been selected to construct homes in an architecturally historical style intended to complement the surrounding Menlo Park neighborhood, she said. The homes, some single-family dwellings, others apartments or condos, are intended to reflect a keen sense of energy efficiency through the use of rammed earth, masonry and adobe construction.

She expects the first models to be open to the public by next summer.

Another element in the development is a planned pedestrian-only thoroughfare that angles through the proposed neighborhood and follows the route of a pair of 2,500-year-old canals discovered during an archeological investigation of the site.