

DEVELOPING

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Napa's \$300 million downtown transformation has designs for condos, hotel and a rooftop bar

By **J.K. Dineen**, Staff Writer

Sep 20, 2025



A historic project is downtown Napa's largest development plan in decades.
Santiago Mejia/S.F. Chronicle



Listen Now: Napa's \$300 million downtown transformation has designs for condos, hotel and a rooftop bar

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Downtown Napa Association Executive Director Bill LaLiberte was worried earlier this year when Kohl's closed at First and Main streets and four other businesses in the 3-acre site in the heart of the Wine Country city were informed they would have to relocate to make way for redevelopment.

Sure, he knew that there was a plan for a big project to replace the shuttered businesses: a structure with 78 condos and a 161-room hotel including a restaurant and a rooftop bar. He had seen the renderings of the soaring public spaces — the four-story conservatory and ballroom with glass cathedral ceilings, the handsome lobby that visitors could meander through while walking from picnics at the Oxbow Public Market to the boutiques and tasting rooms at First Street Napa.

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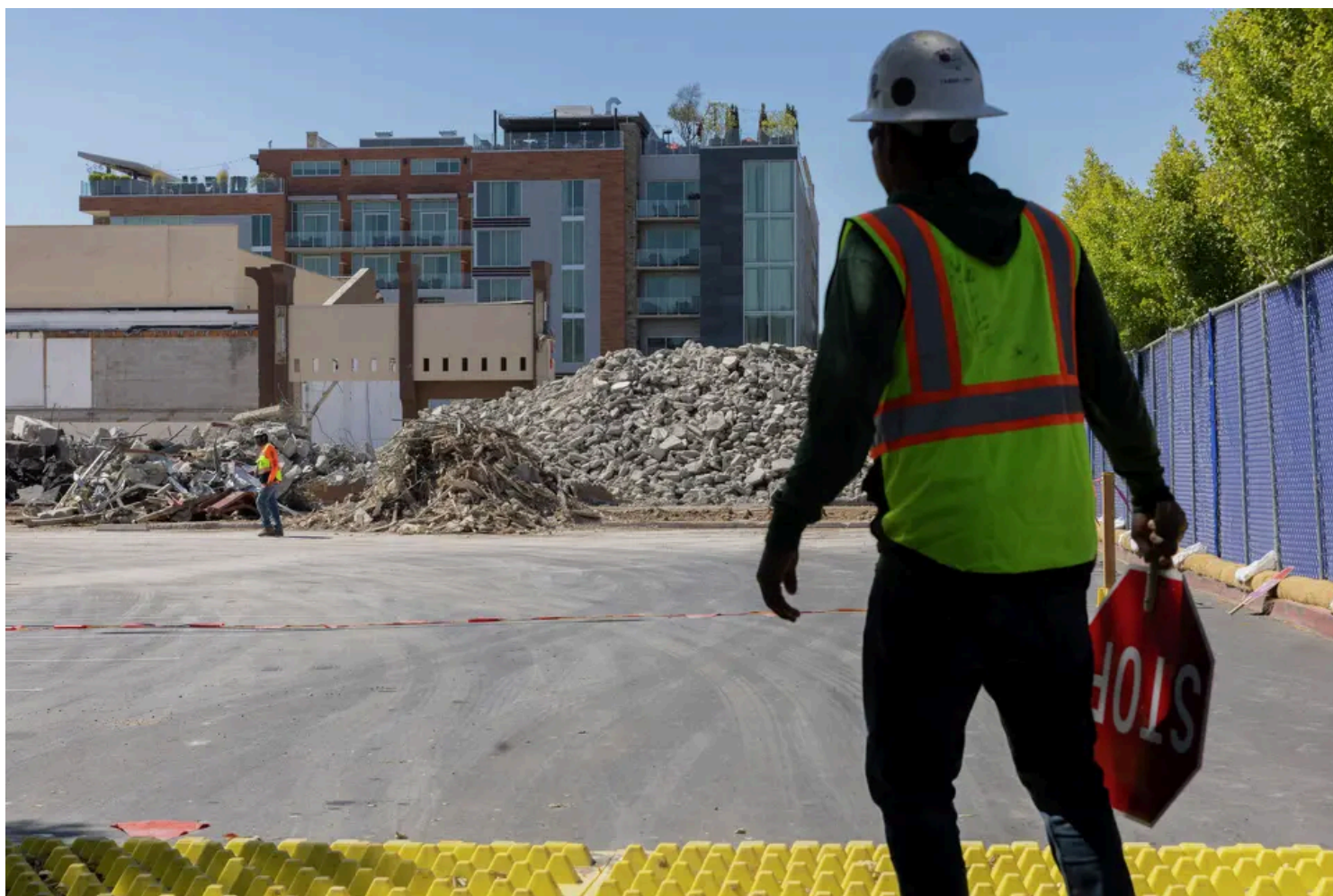
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The project looked great on paper: The biggest investment in downtown Napa in decades.

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It's part of a trend of the urbanization of wine country cities. From Healdsburg to Petaluma to Santa Rosa, once sleepy downtowns are constructing six-, seven- and eight-story buildings, buzzy rooftop bars and Michelin star restaurants. Investors that had long focused on the spas and opulent on-site tasting rooms at the wineries are now bringing those experiences to walkable city centers.



A historic project is taking place in downtown Napa that will see a hotel, condos and retail replace department stores and parking lots.

Santiago Mejia/S.F. Chronicle

But LaLiberte had been around long enough to see ambitious developments stall out. He had seen builders come into town with enticing plans only to lose financing or interest and let properties sit boarded up for years. Among downtown merchants there was fear that the project site would be an eyesore.

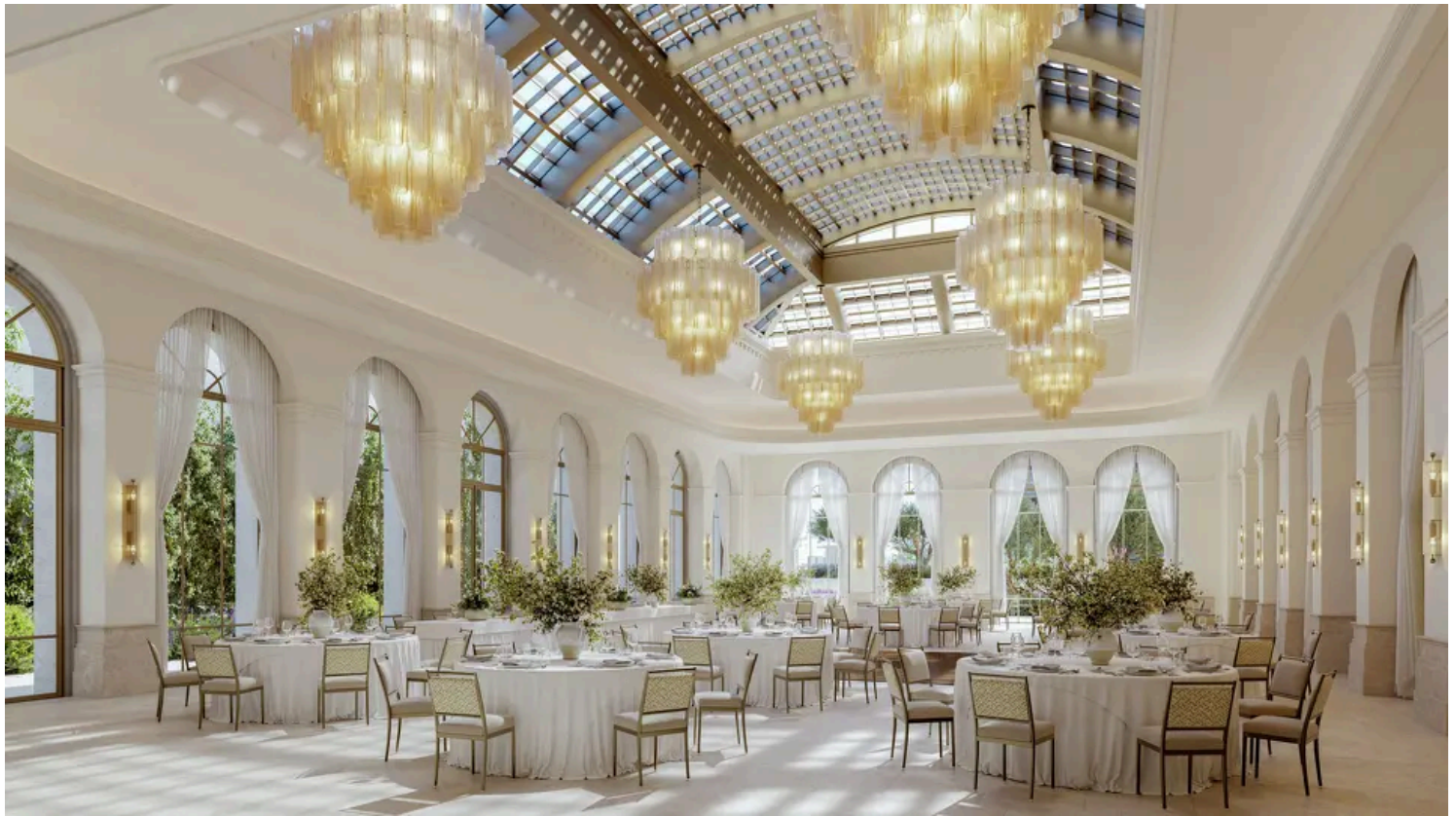
“There were four merchants displaced, a lot of us were concerned: ‘Is this going to be another situation where the property sits there for three or four years with a fence around it before construction starts?’” he said.

As it turned out, those fears of stalled development were misplaced. The day after Mexican eatery Don Perico, served its last meal at its old location, and moved to a spot in First Street Napa, a blue Build Group construction fence went up. A few days later demolition crews arrived to start dismantling the Kohl’s department store, a parking garage and the small retail strip known as Parkway Plaza.

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“Now we understand. These guys are moving very, very quickly,” LaLiberte said. “It’s been impressive. It’s a meaningful investment in downtown that is going to have impact for years and years to come.”



A rendering of the proposed ballroom with glass cathedral ceilings that will be part of a redevelopment project in downtown Napa. Courtesy Build Group, Inc.

Today, the property at First and Main is a full-blown construction site with a massive pile of construction rubble — metal and bricks, concrete and rebar — heaped in the center of the property. Only one section of a wall remains of an old department store, which originally had been a Mervyn’s. Soon there will be two construction cranes, one for the hotel and one for the condo building, with each crane standing seven stories tall. The only other construction crane that has ever been erected in downtown Napa was for the Archer Hotel, which opened in 2017.

Jerry Hunt, a partner with developer 300 Venture Group, said the project, which will open in 2027, represents the final piece of a redevelopment plan that started in the 1990s with the riverfront, where wetland restoration, floodwalls, new bridges and waterfront parks and walkways have reconnected the community with the river and prevented flooding. That was followed by the development of the Oxbow Public Market, the Archer Hotel, and the collection of shops on First Street.

“This feels like revolution, but really it has been more of an evolution,” Hunt said. “You have this rich network of restaurants and businesses that have developed organically. Downtown Napa has become a legit destination.”



A new project in downtown Napa is part of a decadeslong plan to transform the Wine Country city's core.
Santiago Mejia/S.F. Chronicle

Hunt said his team wanted to create a downtown centerpiece that would not only bring in hotel guests and condo buyers, but also become a local hangout.

“The design has this permanent and civic quality to it,” Hunt said. “You may not be staying at the hotel. You may be a local with friends in town. It’s going to be a place where you want to take visitors to see the grand hotel lobby, the enormous conservatory with arched glass.”

For the general contractor Build Group, the Napa project is the biggest job under construction in the Bay Area. It is being built by the NorCal Carpenters Union.

“Together, we’re building something that honors Napa’s past and creates lasting value for its future,” said Nathan Rundel, co-founder and president at the San Francisco-based Build Group.

The project's design features a convex frontage on First Street that echoes the original Migliavacca Building, honoring the family that helped establish Napa's early commercial and civic identity in the 19th century. At the heart of the hotel design is a new public paseo that will link Napa's First Street with Brown Street and the city's 9/11 Memorial.



A construction site that's part of the redevelopment of downtown in Napa.
Santiago Mejia/S.F. Chronicle

Instead of being tucked away out of sight behind a department store, the memorial will be seen by thousands of visitors. The developers have also committed to making improvements to the memorial, working with artist Gordon Huether to design a water feature.

Huether, 66, called the start of construction "really emotional." He has spent his entire life in Napa, with the exception of six years of middle school and high school when his mother moved their family to San Francisco. While he was gone, Napa's downtown was transformed by a redevelopment plan that allowed the demolition of historic buildings and the addition of parking garages and a big department store with a surface parking lot in front of it. There was Dwight Murray Plaza with a clock tower and "a big lava rock fountain that never worked."

He returned to Napa at age 18.

“I was shocked at what had happened to my downtown,” he said. “The whole time I was in (San Francisco) I was longing to go back to the Napa I knew. When I got back it wasn’t there any more. It was very emotional and personal for me.”

Huether, who has done public art projects around the world, served 20 years on the city’s planning commission with the goal of undoing the damage redevelopment had wrought. He calls it “the redevelopment of redevelopment.”

“We had no design guidelines, no public art ordinance, no downtown specific plan,” he said.



A rendering of the lobby of a proposed building that’s part of the redevelopment of downtown Napa.
Courtesy Build Group, Inc.

Huether sees the hotel and condos at First and Main as the next major milestone in correcting history.

“It’s been quite an amazing transformation. It’s like when you remodel your bathroom, now your bedroom looks crappy,” he said. “As we have moved down First Street, moved down Main Street and it’s all shiny and new and the thing next to it is still sitting there and it’s just wanting attention.”

And he’s not a fan of the Kohl’s architecture.

“I don’t know that there has been anything uglier built in Napa,” Huether said, before acknowledging the region’s competitiveness. “It’s communities upping their game with more mature quality of materials and architecture and amenities,” he said. “If Napa is competing with Healdsburg and someone there is building a really nice hotel with a four-star restaurant, we better get a hotel with a five-star restaurant.”

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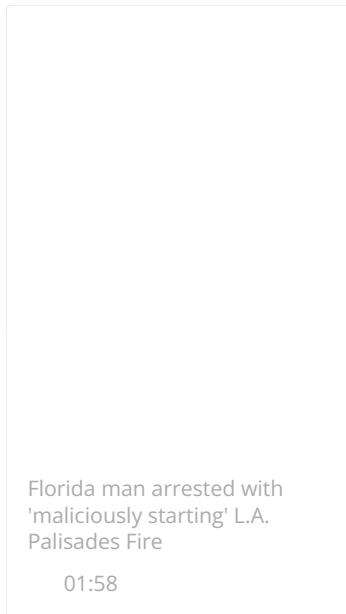
**J.K. Dineen**

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J.K. Dineen covers housing and real estate development. He joined The Chronicle in 2014 covering San Francisco land use politics for the City Hall team. He has since expanded his focus to explore housing and development issues throughout Northern California. He is the author of two books: "Here Tomorrow" (Heyday, 2013) and "High Spirits" (Heyday, 2015).

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