Somali marketplace set to open; Restaurant, mosque, shops are planned
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In his four years in San Diego, Mohamud Ahmed longed for a place where he and fellow Somali refugees could easily cash checks, transfer money home and pay bills.

There are only a handful of Somali-owned businesses catering to the East African community. So, when a Somali community leader proposed opening a mall with space for 40 merchants, a mosque and a restaurant, Ahmed signed up.

He and his partners plan to operate Shidaal Express, which will offer financial services, including money transfers and check cashing. It also will provide business services, such as computer sales and repair, and immigration help.

"We have talked to people, and they need these services," Ahmed said.

With an estimated 12,000 Somalis in San Diego -- mostly in City Heights -- the community has been eager to have its own central shopping and meeting area: a place to gather over meals, buy traditional clothing and find East African food.

African Marketplace could open as soon as next week.

Horn of Africa, a nonprofit group serving East African refugees, is developing the mall. The organization, created in 1994, helps refugees start a new life.

With mostly federal, state and private grants, the group has created family and youth support programs and become an information resource in the community.

"This is the best thing we could do," said Abdi Mohamoud, the organization's executive director. "Here's a chance to dramatically improve the community."

The mall isn't meant to generate major profits, Mohamoud said. Rather, it's an opportunity for aspiring business owners.

There has been talk of such an endeavor in the Somali community for a few years, Mohamoud said. Local Somalis knew of cities in Minnesota and Ohio with large East African populations that have been successful in opening malls.

San Diego's high real estate prices made it almost impossible, Mohamoud said, until earlier this year.

Mohamoud found a vacant grocery store in a shopping plaza on the southwest corner of El Cajon Boulevard and 54th Street, and inquired. Mohamoud declined to give the financial details of the lease.
With loans and contributions from business owners, Mohamoud said, the community has poured $150,000 into building improvements. Mohamoud also used some of his money to get the project going.

"We've done this all by ourselves," he said.

Finding tenants was easier than expected. The 40 spaces were quickly leased, and there's a waiting list.

Most of the leases went to Somali women, but the mall is open to anyone, Mohamoud said. There also are people from Afghanistan and Eritrea opening businesses in the mall.

"It's a little diverse," Mohamoud said. "We hope to keep it that way."

The mall is near a new youth center in Colina Del Sol Park, which Horn of Africa helped fund with the Police Athletic League. It also will be within walking distance of a few schools and the organization's office.

"It's all connected," said Hamse Warfa, community outreach specialists for Horn of Africa.

Ahmed is sure the mall will be popular within the Somali community.

"Now anything they need, they will find it," he said. "This is what the community needed to have."

Caption: 2 PICS 1 MAP
1. Abad Ali cleaned a carpet in a former grocery store at El Cajon Boulevard and 54th Street that will become African Marketplace. 2. Proposed African Marketplace (Eds. R,S,C) 3. Mdosi Kaso, left, handed a cell phone to Ahmed Munir near business stalls that are being built inside a former grocery store. The venture will be a gathering place for the Somali community. The 40 spaces were quickly leased, and there's a waiting list. (Ed. R) 1,3. Laura Embry / Union-Tribune 2. AARON STECKELBERG / Union-Tribune, SOURCES: ESRI; TeleAtlas Memo: Editions vary Edition: R,E,S,C Section: LOCAL Page: B-1 Index Terms: REFUGEES Record Number: UTS1971615 Copyright 2006 Union-Tribune Publishing Co.

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