

Metrocenter_v2.mp3

[00:00:05] **Thomas** Think back to when you were a kid. Picture your hometown and all the places you'd go with your family, with your friends, or even just on your own. If you're anything like me, there are a lot of things that flash before your mind's eye. But there is probably one place that rises above the others, whether because that's where most of the memories took place, or possibly because that was where you had the best memory of your childhood. Most of us can probably go through that exercise and come up with one or more locations that carry such nostalgic weight. And for a lot of people here in the Valley. That place is Phoenix Metrocenter Mall. We've done quite a few stories over the years since Metrocenter opened in 1973 detailing exactly why this place, which is seemingly nothing more than just another mall, is so special. But sadly, Metrocentre permanently closed its doors two years ago in 2020. So today I felt it was appropriate to do one final story about the center and answer a question I'm sure is on a lot of Phoenixian's minds right about now. What's next? Welcome to Valley 1 to 1, a podcast by the Arizona Republic and AZ Central dot com. I'm audio producer Thomas Friends. And today I'm going to take a quick look at the history of Metrocentre before diving into an exploration of what's to become of the site. I came to the Valley in 2020 just as the lockdown went into full effect. As such, I never got a chance to even take a step inside before they were declaring that Metrocenter would be shutting down not just until the pandemic cleared up a bit, but permanently. So when I heard that it was going to be demolished and a lot of people were devastated by that news, I needed to find out why this place was considered so special before I could look into its future. Metrocentre opened its doors in 1973 at 1.4 million square feet, two stories and with five anchor stores. The new shopping center instantly became the largest mall in Arizona at the time and one of the largest in the entire U.S. The mall was built at what was then the northern border of Phoenix. In fact, the city had to annex an unincorporated section of Maricopa County in order for the entire 98 acres of shopping to be fully inside of the city limits. So many things can be said about Metrocentre from the 1975 Disneyland event that brought the magic of Christmas and Disney together, complete with a 37-foot replica of Cinderella's Castle to the event that made Metrocentre famous in 1989. Filming the mall sections of Bill and Ted's excellent adventure.

[00:03:54] **Speaker 2** No way.

[00:03:54] Yes way.

[00:03:57] **Thomas** But I didn't want to just spout facts researched on the internet at you. I wanted to get a firsthand account from someone who grew up and loved this place. For that, I sat down with Robrt Peler, weekly contributor to the Phoenix New Times, to get his perspective.

[00:04:16] **Robrt Peler** They were more often in the sixties and seventies designing developments that didn't include, for example, a city park or a community center. And so shopping malls, for a lot of us in the suburbs of the sixties and seventies kind of became our de facto community center. We hung out at, for example, Metrocenter, older people going to movies and restaurants and bars and certainly children. We went there to play pinball and to spend our allowance money and to shoplift records from JCPenney's. In my case, anyway. It filled that void for a lot of us. How big a shopping mall that you could walk to or bicycle to, or that mom could drop you off at, and we could go to the movies and we could have lunch and we could go ice skating, and then Mom would swing by and pick us up at 6 p.m.

[00:05:15] **Thomas** Robrt describes it as a time where kids could just hang out away from mom or dad and enjoy all the things that Metrocenter had to offer. And at the time, Phoenix didn't have much in the way of entertaining kids, at least nothing that was close enough for them to get to easily. So Metrocenter, with its plethora of options, like an arcade and ice skating rink, wasn't just a mall, it became a playground. Robrt even convinced his high school teacher to let him get yearbook photos there.

[00:05:52] **Robrt Pela** I went to my teacher and said, Hey, you know, I'm going to take all of the clubs and organizations off campus for their annual yearbook photo because otherwise they all look like police lineups. It's just teenagers standing in a line, staring into a camera. And I'm going to take them to Metrocenter and I'm going pose them around all of those beautiful sculptures and fountains and backdrops. I took, I think it was the key club, and I made them roll up their jeans and stand in the fountain. When my thought in 1979 turned to what's a really beautiful place around here where I can take a bunch of people to be photographed, I wasn't thinking about a national park because we didn't have one. I wasn't thinking about taking them into the woods to be photographed, photographed among greenery. My thought turned to Metrocenter because it was full of fountains and sculptures and cool backdrops.

[00:06:53] **Thomas** But now those beautiful fountains are dry, the sprawling halls of Metrocenter empty. The buildings sit there waiting to be demolished. So many milestones for so many people at Metrocenter. Friendships formed, first jobs worked, first dates and even other firsts, according to Robrt. It almost feels like losing a friend after finding out how incredible one mall could be. But don't fret just yet. Because I had the chance to talk with the senior advisor to the Concord Wilshire Group, Steve Betts, and the plan he told me about for the space sounds just as incredible.

[00:07:39] **Steve Betts** They sort of figured out the best avenue to approach this project, looking at it as the potential for a true urban village, a mixed-use urban village, primarily of residential. So think of it as a West Valley cure, but maybe a little bit of a drop-down scale. But 3000 dwelling units approximately with an urban core, with a park and recreational element at the center, with some retail around that. And why might you think that would make sense? Well, it's because light rail has now been constructed to that end into this 80-acre parcel that was Metrocenter Mall. So this particular developer looked at that and said, well, this really becomes the premier T.O.D., as we call it, transit-oriented development site in the valley. And so it gave us the development team an opportunity to look at this as true transit-oriented development for folks to live, work, play right here along I-17 along the Black Canyon corridor with the opportunity to hop, hop on transit and take transit into midtown, downtown Phoenix, into ASU, to the airport, and to sporting and cultural events.

[00:09:02] **Thomas** Not only will the light rail connect the new residents to the rest of Phoenix, but the developers are in talks with the city to add bus transit connections. This would provide the people of the proposed urban village to connect with jobs north of Phoenix, such as the Taiwanese semiconductor plant being built 20 minutes north of here. A project like this is daunting. Something Steve told me that I'd never known was that in malls like Metrocenter, the big box stores that anchor the mall own their own building. So when the whole thing shuts down, to do anything with the leftover space, a developer has to collect those anchor buildings from places like Macy's and Dillard's and J.C. Penney, and to use Steve's metaphor, put Humpty Dumpty back together. For that reason, many companies have looked at Metrocenter and walked away. But it got me thinking if

collecting the anchors and then removing the spaghetti of power and sewer lines is so difficult, why demolish the center instead of repurposing it?

[00:10:20] **Steve Betts** The city had reached out to the community over the last several years and asked the community in there what would they like to see happen to this area and what they would like to see. And the city really said that that would be their preference, that they didn't want this to be constructed just as big industrial boxes, their preference would be for this to be more of a residential, urban village style. But secondly, they were reacting to a marketplace to what the market will bear on this in terms of what can be economically developed. What we're having to do a better job of now in the Valley is build better housing for this great employment that we're starting to attract. And so this was really an opportunity for us to react to that marketplace, to react to what the market needs.

[00:11:12] **Thomas** And what the market and the city both need right now is something Steve calls attainable housing. This isn't quite the same as affordable housing. It's something of a middle ground between that and market pricing. These residences, according to Steve, will be good housing for workforce individuals and families such as teachers, police officers, factory line workers, and so on. The developers want these residences to be attainable by the average worker, but they're going one step further as part of their deal with the city. The developer will receive a tax reduction to help offset the cost of developing this village, and a percentage of that reduction will be contributed to Phoenix's affordable housing initiatives. This all sounded like a great proposal, but it left me with one final question. Would the memory of Metrocenter be preserved even if the physical buildings wouldn't?

[00:12:25] **Steve Betts** Yes, that is the short answer. But let me give you a longer answer. You have sensed the same thing that we've been sensing this development team has been sensing for the last year and a half as we've been reaching out and talking to people in the community. We haven't decided exactly how we're going to sort of honor the history of Metrocenter yet, whether it's going to be a little bit of a historical museum piece or whether it's just going to be different plaques around the village center. But somehow we're going to try to reflect the history of the mall. Our idea is that this is a community gathering point, not just for the residents, the 5000 or so residents of this urban village, but for everyone in this area to come into this town center on weekends and on evenings to take advantage of the park and plaza that we're building in the center of this.

[00:13:31] **Thomas** Thank you for joining me today on this journey into the history and the future of the Phoenix Metrocenter. Have a special memory at this very special mall. We'd love to hear about it or even see your pictures. Reach out to us on Twitter at A-Z Podcasts. If you have questions about Metro Phoenix or beyond, please submit them to us at Valley 101 dot AZ Central dot com. If you're a fan of the show, please share it with a friend and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. I'm producer Thomas France. Thank you again for listening. We'll see you next week.