

## Austin retailers cater to Asian population with developments

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While Austin's total population doubles every 20 years, the city's Asian population is growing twice as fast, and Austin retailers are beginning to respond.

Chinatown Center, a 180,000-square-foot shopping center with a supermarket, restaurants and shops catering to the Asian demographic, opened in North Austin Sept. 30. And Hong Kong Supermarket Inc., currently located in North Austin, is building a new, larger center that will open in late 2007.

The Asian Center, which will include 26,000 square feet of retail space, a 24,000-square-foot grocery store and feature an Asian architectural theme, is also under way one block north of Chinatown Center at 11220 North Lamar Blvd.

Duc Mihn Lu, owner of the Asian Center and a Phillips 66 station on West Koenig Lane and a native of Vietnam, says that he bought the land for the project in the 1990s because he believed Austin's Asian community, especially in North Austin, was growing.

He says the grocery store will offer products that cannot be found in traditional American grocery stores, such as different types of soy sauce, 20 to 30 different types of rice and live seafood.

The Asian center is being built in two phases. The retail space will open this month, and the grocery store will open in May 2007.

Larry Nelson, president of Austin-based Larry Nelson Co., and the project's developer, says building a space that can support unique products, especially the tanks needed for live seafood, has been challenging.

"That fresh, live seafood has a distinctive odor. We have to be careful about ventilation so it's not pervasive, by providing exhaust and recirculating the air," Nelson says. "We had to provide water and drains that you wouldn't have in a conventional grocery store."

Cindy Lo, president and owner of Austin-based Red Velvet Events Inc., which helped plan Chinatown Center's grand opening and other events, says that before Chinatown Center opened, Austin's Asian population was underserved.

Lo says that those who wanted to shop for Asian goods before Chinatown opened had to travel to Houston and Dallas.

"These two centers will definitely help fill the void," she says.

Retailers in Houston and Dallas continue to expand, as well. Businesses such as an Asian town center, currently under construction and scheduled to open next October in North Dallas, will



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Duc Mihn Lu, owner of the Asian Center and a Phillips 66 station on West Koenig Lane, says the grocery store being constructed will cater to Austin's growing Asian demographic.

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feature the East Coast chain H Mart. This Dallas project may foretell the future of Austin's Asian businesses.

Lo says that Chinatown Center's success has exceeded expectations since its opening. Austin's Asian community and the city's general community both have supported the center, a trend she expects to continue.

"Asians love quality goods at a reasonable price. Asians are extremely generous people, and if the restaurant or store offers quality goods or services for a fair price, they are very loyal," Lo says.

"I wouldn't necessarily say that this is different from any other consumers; however, I will say that Asians tend to be far more generous when it comes to giving and spending money if they find a vendor or store they like."

Nelson says he believes demand to support the two centers exists. He cites the Asian Center's location at the intersection of Lamar Boulevard and Braker Lane, the orientation and the smaller size as advantages that will give it an edge over the larger Chinatown Center.

David Chan, the president and CEO of the Texas Asian Chamber of Commerce, says that, in addition to the larger stores that are being built in North Austin, many small Asian retail shops and grocery stores are scattered around Austin.

He too says that, although the new stores will likely have to advertise, the trend supports growth.

He's unsure, however, whether the large stores will complement or drive out the small stores that currently exist.

Ryan Robinson, city demographer in the planning department of the city of Austin, estimates that about 47,000 Asians live in the city.

As the city's fastest-growing demographic group, Asians will eventually outnumber Austin's African-American population and will become the city's second-largest minority group, behind Latinos, around 2015, he says.

The 2000 U.S. census indicated that Austin's Asian population was 4.7 percent of the city's overall population. That fell just behind Houston's Asian population, which made up 5.3 percent of the city's population, and well above Dallas' Asian population, which made up 2.7 percent of the city's population.

Chan points out that, since many Asians are racially mixed or consider themselves Americans (unless they identify closely with an Asian cultural group), they don't identify themselves as Asian and are undercounted in census figures. Robinson agrees, adding that issues of trust, linguistic isolation and cultural traditions also contribute to the disparity.

Austin's four largest Asian groups are Asian Indian, Chinese, Vietnamese and Korean, and Robinson says the Indian and Vietnamese segments are growing at the fastest rate.

Although Asians live throughout Austin, as Lu and Tan International Group, the owners of Chinatown Center observed, a decided concentration of Asian households exists in North Austin.

Robinson says this neighborhood trend was originally due to the concentration of technology firms in that part of the city, but the trend has been furthered by social and cultural networking mechanisms.

"For a variety of reasons, Austin has established itself as an attractor of Asian households, not just students but now entrepreneurs, high tech employees and as service-sector laborers," Robinson says.

"This trend should continue well into the foreseeable future, as Austin has passed a tipping point where our Asian community has gained a level of critical mass, and the social gravity of our Asian community will gain momentum and continue to attract new Asian households and businesses that cater to these households."

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