

It will take outside interest to save the bowling alley and exhibition hall at Big Town and to make shops and restaurants part of a new development on the site of the dying mall. "Our primary purpose is to create an upscale business park with distribution centers nearby," said Spencer Alpert, the investor behind the project.

Mr. Alpert originally planned a mixed-use urban center with upscale apartments but has shifted his vision to an industrial park with a limited shopping and restaurant area and a hotel. The nonindustrial uses have yet to draw much interest, however.

"We have not been able to attract retail users for the site yet," Mr. Alpert said. "It's hard to make it appear attractive when the existing retail use is as run-down as it is." Big Town, built in 1959 as the state's first enclosed mall, today has only a few retail tenants surrounded by vacant storefronts and a parking lot littered with broken glass.

Before postponing a public hearing on the planned development Monday, Mayor Mike Anderson said the city was disappointed that the property had become dilapidated. That has made the project a harder sell for the city, he said.

"It is a large project that will take some additional time to work through," Mr. Anderson said Monday. Mr. Alpert said that a City Council work session has been planned for April 18 but that a public hearing has yet to be rescheduled.

Despite the delays, Mr. Alpert feels more confident than he did about the possibility of saving the bowling alley at the mall's southwest corner.

"I have become a true believer," he said of the support he has seen for the bowling lanes used by several youth and senior leagues. "I'm impressed by the level of commitment from the people who use the center now." That backing might make the bowling alley more appealing for a new management company, which could be required to refurbish the center in order to save it.

"It has to be economically viable for someone to come in and renovate it," Mr. Alpert said. "I am going to try to bring along a user who will update and upgrade the facility." The exhibition hall, which sits at the northeast corner of the property near U.S. Highway 80, provides less temptation for renovation, partly because its location next to the proposed retail area makes it more valuable for other uses.

If that space isn't developed immediately, Mr. Alpert said, he plans to landscape it while the mall is demolished and distribution centers are built on the resulting space. A business park developer is ready to start building one of three roughly \$10 million facilities within a year of closing on the property, Mr. Alpert said. The other planned warehouses would follow in phases. Once they were completed, if no one had stepped forward to build the restaurants, shops and hotel and to renovate the exhibition hall, then that area could be considered for a fourth distribution center.

Whatever winds up being built, Mr. Alpert has said, he will provide an extensively landscaped 100-foot buffer from the highway. "It will give visual impact to the site that would be a very positive gateway to the city for Mesquite," he said.

Once greenery is installed and buildings start going up, Mr. Alpert said, he hopes others see the potential for the project.

"My view is that this is really an overlooked site that has great attraction because of its strategic location," he said. "I'm hopeful that the latter phases will create a desirable effect for some retail users, too."