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Memo:IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

For more information on the project, contact the Mexican Heritage Corp. at (408) 292-5197.

'99 OPENING SEEN FOR MEXICAN CENTER

CAROLYN JUNG, Mercury News Staff Writer

For 10 years, it had been little more than sketches, ideas and dreams for what was once a long-neglected part of East San Jose.

But come October, bulldozers are expected to break ground at Alum Rock Avenue and King Road for a grand showpiece to be built at the gateway to the city's oldest and largest Mexican-American community.

The vibrant Mexican Cultural Heritage Gardens and Plaza is expected to be completed by March 1999, project backers predict. More than 100 residents, community activists and politicians turned out Wednesday night at James Lick High School to hear the news that this long-awaited project finally will begin.

"We are all salivating with anticipation while we wait for the doors of this project to open up," said county Supervisor **Blanca Alvarado**, one of the main catalysts behind the project. "This will be a place where the community will gather, a place where we will share, a place where we will experience."

The six-acre development of cream and terra cotta buildings will feature a 500-seat theater for cultural performances, classrooms for music and dance workshops, an auditorium for lectures and receptions, an art gallery for exhibitions and a lush garden with a sunken pool and fountain.

Next door, the Mexican-American Community Services Agency will construct a 60-unit apartment building for low-income seniors.

The San Jose Redevelopment Agency has committed \$25 million toward the purchase of the land, design and construction of the park. The city also is giving \$25,000 in matching funds toward the project.

"I'm really excited about this project, not just for the East Side but for the whole community," San Jose Councilman Manny Diaz said. "This will be a place where our children can go and remember our roots."

This will be San Jose's fourth internationally themed cultural garden, joining the Chinese Cultural Garden in the Overfelt Botanical Gardens, the Japanese Friendship Garden in Kelley Park and the Vietnamese Cultural Heritage Garden planned near Capitol Expressway and Senter Road.

Residents said the cultural center will be a new jewel in their community.

"It's a good project," said Benito Ramirez, 66, a retired plumber who has lived in the East Side for 30 years. "I hope it will bring people together for the good of the community."

Illustration:Drawing, Map

DRAWING: SPECIAL TO THE MERCURY NEWS

This sketch shows one view of the Mexican Cultural Heritage Gardens and Plaza, for which ground is expected to be broken in October.

MAP: MERCURY NEWS

Mexican Cultural Heritage Gardens

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