

# Little Italy breaks ground



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San Antonio.- ***Accompanied by members of the Christopher Columbus Italian Society, Chairman of Little Italy San Antonio, Frank Monaco, digs a shovel to represent the groundbreaking of the new sign and renaming of Columbus Park. (Photo, Natalie Bobadilla)***

Ladies and gentlemen, hold on to your hats, and by hats, I mean hard hats.

After a long-awaited four years, construction is finally underway for Little Italy San Antonio.

The groundbreaking ceremony held Friday honored the renaming of Columbus Park to Piazza di Colombo Park with construction of new signage designed by local architect Roberto Treviño.

The park is located on 500 Columbus Street, directly in front of San Francesco di Paola Catholic Church and Columbus Hall.

“The idea is that the sign should complete something what was started back in 1927 when this historic church and hall were built, the sign architecturally connects to the

historic structures that are already here,” Treviño said, “We’re hoping that it looks like it belongs.”

Despite the groundbreaking only representing the installment of the sign with the parks new name, Treviño sees it as a catalyst for the entire Little Italy project.

“The whole point of the sign is to kick-off what we’ve been pushing for, which is that the park becomes similar to *La Villita*, but instead of having all these shops with an old Mexico feel, they will have an Italian slant,” Treviño said.

Once the shops are constructed, Italian-inspired homes will be built behind the historic church and hall.

“We’re recreating a whole community, we have a park, we’ve got a church, the hall, we’ll have residences, we’ll have shops, maybe a small restaurant, a deli, a place for gelato, if you lived here you wouldn’t have to go anywhere,” Treviño said. “It’ll be a microcosm of a community.”

Although the ideas are bountiful for Treviño and The Christopher Columbus Italian Society, the money is scarce.

“We see it as a phase project, over time, as we raise the capital, we’ll be able to do the next phase,” Treviño said. “I think showing that we have some movement will help push that forward.”

Chairman of Little Italy San Antonio, Frank Monaco, says the primary purpose of the project is to honor those who founded the Christopher Columbus Italian Society in 1890.

“They had no money, couldn’t speak English, but they gathered together and helped other Italian immigrants come over and establish business,” Monaco said.

Until the 1960s, the Italian community in San Antonio dominated the land set aside for Little Italy.

“Everyone would gather around the church for baptisms, weddings and funerals, this church and this hall were the center of the community,” Monaco said.

With the expansion of the city and intrusion of highways on the land, the Italian community went their separate ways, putting a strain on the church and hall.

"Our idea is to bring the people back here, back to the church, back to the hall, back to their roots," Monaco said.

Given that the first generation immigrants left such an invaluable heritage with the church and hall, Frank Pantuso, an active member of the society for 71 years, says it's the society's duty to leave something behind.

"Little Italy has got to be the answer," Pantuso stressed, "I just hope I'm here when they cut the ribbon."

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