

NEWS

# Historic Kress Building to be reborn as a food hall, events center in Downtown El Paso

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 El Paso Times

Published 10:41 a.m. MT April 26, 2022 | Updated 12:04 p.m. MT April 26, 2022



**The Plaza Hotel Pioneer Plaza grand opening**  
 Paul L. Foster and his wife Alejandra de la Vega opened their latest project, The Plaza Pioneer Plaza in downtown El Paso. The iconic Trust hotel had been closed for almost 30 years. Mark Lamber and Oriana Sanchez, *El Paso Times*

The historic, former Kress Department Store building in Downtown El Paso will be reborn as a food hall under plans announced Tuesday.

It also will have a second-floor events center and basement spa connected by tunnel to the next-door Plaza Hotel Pioneer Park.

Renovation of the 84-year-old, long-vacant building with its distinctive art-deco exterior is expected to begin in June or July and take about two years to complete.

The project will cost an estimated \$18.4 million, including about \$3 million to build a tunnel under the narrow Oregon Street, according to information presented to City Council.



Businessman Paul Foster plans to renovate the Kress Building in Downtown El Paso into a food hall, events center, and spa. GABY VELASQUEZ/ EL PASO TIMES

City Council Tuesday approved providing up to \$2.05 million in various city tax rebates over 20 years to a company operated by El Paso billionaire [Paul Foster, who has owned the building](#) just over three years. The rebates are to help pay for the renovation.

The El Paso Times reported initial details of the [renovation plans in March](#), when City Council gave the green light for city staff to negotiate an incentives agreement.

El Paso County Commissioners Court in March approved giving county property tax rebates of up to \$414,894 over 10 years for the renovation.

Mayor Oscar Leeser and other City Council members recounted fond memories they and their families have of the former Kress Department Store as they praised the renovation project before approving the tax incentives at Tuesday's council meeting.

Leeser said recreating the Kress Building will help other generations get fond memories of the iconic building, but more important, he said, investments in Downtown "energizes our whole community."

The building at Mills Avenue and Oregon Street is on the edge of San Jacinto Plaza and across the street from two other buildings Foster renovated.

It was completed in 1938, and had an extensive interior renovation in 1955, according to an architect's report written for applications for federal and state historical tax credits.

**More: [West El Paso's Montecillo continues growing with \\$80 million in new apartment construction](#)**

Foster, along with his wife and daughter, had the idea to turn the Kress Building into what likely will be El Paso's first food hall, a popular concept in other cities, said William Kell, chief operating officer for Franklin Mountain Investments, Foster's company doing the restoration.

The food hall will feature local food offerings with no national franchised brands, Kell said prior to Tuesday's announcement.



William Kell, chief operating officer of Franklin Mountain Investments, stands outside the Kress Building, middle, in Downtown El Paso April 22. Kell oversees real estate ventures for businessman Paul Foster, who plans to renovate the Kress Building into a food hall, events center, and spa. GABY VELASQUEZ/ EL PASO TIMES

"We're in the process of reaching out to the local community to determine who is interested in being in the food hall," Kell said. "We're going to select vendors that are up and coming and show promise of potential and want to further develop their product."

The food hall, to be located on the building's 15,000 square-foot main floor, will probably have around 12 food vendors, each in separate stations, interspersed with small, local retail vendors, he said.

A key feature of the long-closed store will either be renovated or replaced: A lunch counter with a soda fountain. It appears to have been altered by the 1955 interior renovation, according to the architect's report.



Businessman Paul Foster plans to renovate the Kress Building in Downtown El Paso into a food hall, events center, and spa. It's to be connected by a tunnel to Foster's next-door Plaza Hotel Pioneer Park, shown here behind Kress. GABY VELASQUEZ/ EL PASO TIMES

"A lot of people have very fond memories of the soda fountain," Kell said.

It's dilapidated, beat up, dirty, (with) lots of ugly, old, very dirty kitchen equipment and stuff like that," he said. "There might be something there we can save."

If it can't be saved, a new one will be installed as part of a diner-style food outlet, Kell said.

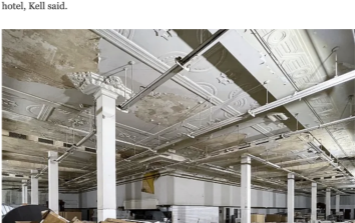
The food hall also will have a bar operated by a Foster company.



The lunch counter inside the Kress Building is to be refurbished or replaced and become part of a Food Hall on the ground floor of the Downtown building set to be renovated. COURTESY FRANKLIN MOUNTAIN INVESTMENTS

The 15,000 square-foot second floor will be an events center with a large, flexible room for various events, ranging from business meetings to weddings. It also will have small, private viewing rooms for watching NFL games and other things, Kell said. It also will have an area with games, similar to Dave & Buster's, but on a smaller scale, he said.

The 15,000 square-foot basement will be a spa and salon tied to Foster's next door Plaza Hotel Pioneer Park. It will be open to the public, but accessed through the hotel, Kell said.



A portion of the ground floor of the long-vacant, former Kress Department Store building in Downtown El Paso that is to be turned into a food hall in an \$18.4 million renovation project. COURTESY FRANKLIN MOUNTAIN INVESTMENTS

The inside of the building is mostly empty with only a few architectural touches that likely will be restored, Kell said. That includes some original marble terrazzo floors, ceilings with ornate plaster moldings, much of which were damaged by a roof that leaked for years [under the previous owner](#), embossed Kress logos on some walls, and some features around entrances.

The exterior of the building, most of which is covered in cream-colored, glazed terra-cotta, with a distinctive corner tower, will remain intact except for additional cleaning, and some repairs, Kell said. The exterior had its first cleaning about a year ago. Kress signs on three sides of the L-shaped building also will remain.

"We'll of course, try to do what we can to restore and preserve any historical elements," Kell said. What historical pieces must be preserved by state and federal agencies involved with providing historical tax credits for renovations, he said.

The Kress Building has received preliminary approval to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Kell said.

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