

Local

Trader Joe's ready to bestow new life on old Media armory

■ Grocery store proceeding as planned. Residents await much-anticipated July 28 grand opening.

By **SUSAN L. SERBIN**
Times Correspondent

MEDIA — A car pulled up to the Baker Street sidewalk where architect Robert Linn was talking with Rick Byrne, a supervisor for contractor E.P. Guidi. A man leaned out the window and asked, "Is Trader Joe's open yet?"

The long wait will be over soon. The heavy work is practically finished and the fun just about to start. Trader Joe's grocery company has brought a whole new life to the Media armory.

It's hard to know just where to begin: With the design by famed Rose Valley architect William Price; the installation of the Cooper Rifles from Philadelphia; as the departure point for soldiers in World War I; or as the longest continuous use National Guard Armory in the state until departure at the turn of the 21st century.

That's just for starters.

Media High School students once took physical education there. The community conducted dances and events in the main hall. Slowly, the staid, often intimidating structure, with its fortress-style architecture, became little used and sadly needing of attention.

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It took the wholehearted support of the late Matthew Ryan, the borough's state representative, to shepherd the purchase. Along with McMahon, key players with perseverance included former borough Solicitor Frank Daly, Councilman Paul Robinson, and county Councilman Andy Reilly.

"This went through three governors. Gov. Ridge saw the value of economic development in the borough. Gov. Schweiker released the money from the capital projects list, and Gov. Rendell delivered the money in May 2003," said McMahon.

State funding of \$1.3 million helped make the purchase and renovation happen. McMahon said he just learned more funding has been confirmed for the project, and is likely to be used for ancillary improvements.

Important to the overall picture is the integration of the Pennsylvania Veterans Museum, which will wrap around Trader Joe's in a unique fashion. The armory plans have also been linked to the Media Theatre in a larger revitalization project.

Once the armory was acquired from the state, the borough was in the position of finding an appropriate, feasible and desirable use. Most borough officials were strongly in favor of a retail presence.

Councilwoman Gail Whitaker is credited with the first mention of Trader Joe's, having seen an operation in California. McMahon said he saw a Boston T.J.'s with slightly smaller space of about 4,700 square feet, and thought, "this could work."

Also, borough residents have longed for a market since the closure of Thriftway, nearly a decade ago.

T.J.'s seemed like a perfect match, and the courting began. The acquisition of an adjacent house and lot for surface parking was critical



Times staff / ROBERT J. GURECKI

Media Mayor Bob McMahon, left, and architect Robert Linn in front of Trader Joe's grocery store at the site of the old Media armory.

to the deal, but met with some criticism.

Upper Providence architect Linn has been the prime mover when it came to the physical project. The building needed to be shored, stabilized, refurbished and spit-polished from foundation to roof line. With the armory's designation on the National Historic Register, all design work had to conform with Pennsylvania State Museum and Historic Commission standards.

"The requirements are to retain the character of the building and make no changes that were not irreversible. For example, we could add steps, railings and ramps because they could be removed," said Linn.

The new entry, with what is called a jack arch, received approval from the commission. Linn used his well-known design sensitivity in not only maintaining, but enhancing the elements of the structure to reflect the borough's character. Inside, he has kept the second level walkway, which was once used as an overlook by drill instructors in National Guard years.

"We had two phenomenal contractors in Murphy-Quigley for the shell, and E. P. Guidi for the interiors," said Linn.

And onto the inside where Trader Joe's "captain," Mike Taylor, is busy with staff training, product placement and all other details leading up to the scheduled July 28 opening.

Shoppers will undoubtedly be delighted by the ways in which the store design honors the borough's past while becoming an integral part of its present and future.

Earlier this year, *Consumer Reports* voted Trader Joe's the number one specialty grocery store.

It has distinctive product lines, and a corporate culture that will be immediately noticed.

"This is an interesting business in an interesting building," said Linn.