

Bay area remains a draw for retailers

By [James Thorne](#), Times Staff Writer

Published Tuesday, February 3, 2009

Based on catastrophic Christmas sales, wallet-stressed consumers and Circuit City-style bankruptcies, you could almost think the Tampa Bay area had ceased buying and selling.

But speakers at a Tampa retailers conference sponsored Tuesday by the International Council of Shopping Centers suggested the region still has sufficient clout to bring in a bevy of new businesses this year.

Upscale grocer the Fresh Market is eyeballing St. Petersburg. Aldi, the discount German supermarket chain, is scouting Wesley Chapel. Kiddy clothing stores like Aeropostale, American Apparel and the Children's Place are thriving. So are pet stores, fitness centers and wholesale shopping clubs like Costco.

Entrepreneurs are introducing two new full-service pizza chains to the Tampa Bay area: Red Elephant Pizza and Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza. Jimmy John's Gourmet Sandwiches is coming to downtown St. Petersburg and Clearwater.

While 2009 is supposed to be a comparatively rotten year for retail, shopping center occupancy stands at 91 percent, not bad by historical standards. Retail bigwigs who assembled by the hundreds at the Grand Hyatt Tampa Bay were urged to suck it up and wait for 2010 and 2011.

"I'm sick of all the complaining," said John Crossman, president of Crossman & Co., one of central Florida's big retail leasing and management firms. "We're in a down cycle — get over it."

In light of retail's recent slump — including the collapse of Linens 'n Things, Circuit City and Bennigan's — entrepreneurs are airing new buzzwords like "necessity retailing" and "vitality retailing." It reflects the fact that people are spending less, living longer and shopping smarter.

Retailers who abide by the buzz continue to rack up big profits: Think McDonald's, Wal-Mart, Dollar Tree and BJ's Wholesale Club.

But not everyone was pleased with the back-to-basics philosophy, reflected in last year's 17.3 percent decline in sales by luxury stores. [James Maurin](#), a Louisiana real estate broker who delivered a lunchtime address, bemoaned the price-chopping mentality. Unless something's 50 percent off, consumers aren't interested anymore, he said.

"It's almost like Mexico here in America now," [Maurin](#) said.

Reliant as they are upon new households to increase sales, retailers are bracing for another lean year. Keynote speaker Hank Fishkind, a Florida economist, told retailers that housing and population growth won't resume in earnest until 2011.

Nor has the credit crunch helped matters. Developers building shopping centers have to front as much as half the cash for the projects. Until 2007, 80 percent, or even 100 percent, financing was common.

Said Seth Layton, executive vice president with Kimco Realty Corp.: "Capital's a coward."

Up, down in retail

Some retailers are growing. Others are consolidating and closing stores. Still others have gone out of business or merged with other companies.

GROWING: BJ's Wholesale Club, Costco, Wal-Mart, Ross, Aeropostale, Dollar General, PetSmart, Publix, McDonald's, dd's Discounts.

CONSOLIDATING: Gap, Pier 1 Imports, Macy's, Office Depot, Starbucks.

GOING AND GONE: Linens 'n Things, Wachovia, Washington Mutual, Circuit City, Bennigan's, Steve & Barry's.

© 2009 • All Rights Reserved • St. Petersburg Times
490 First Avenue South • St. Petersburg, FL 33701 • 727-893-8111
[Contact Us](#) | [Join Us](#) | [Advertise with Us](#) | [Subscribe to the Times](#)
[Privacy Policy](#) | [Standard of Accuracy](#) | [Terms, Conditions & Copyright](#)