

**Shopping centers see core change Recession forced creativity, expert tells real estate pros**  
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The global financial meltdown of 2008 dealt a severe blow to the U.S. shopping center industry, and while a slow recovery is under way, the sector has fundamentally changed.

That was the message from the chairman of a Louisiana-based shopping center owner and developer, who spoke to hundreds of real estate professionals and others gathered Wednesday in downtown Birmingham.

**James Maurin, chairman of Covington, La.-based Stirling Properties** and a past chairman of the International Council of Shopping Centers, said owners and operators of the country's malls and strip centers are finding more creative ways to manage their existing assets, because new development is at a 40-year low.

Speaking at the ICSC's 2011 Gulf South Idea Exchange, held at The Sheraton Birmingham, Maurin noted several current trends at retail centers, including the addition of more quality food options, as well as a greater focus on services and technology vendors and less dependency on fashion tenants.

"We have finally entered the era where asset management, not development, is the most important thing center owners focus on every day," he said.

The key, Maurin said, is to elevate centers from being a collection of stores to places where consumers want to congregate.

In some cases, that includes non-traditional, as well as local, twists, such as putting a farmers market near a retail center.

Another challenge for U.S. shopping center owners is that retailers have drastically scaled back their expansion plans, at least domestically.

Instead, chains such as Gap Inc. are focused on emerging markets in China, the Middle East and Latin America, as they try to not be so dependent on the United States, Maurin said.

Meanwhile, there is cautious optimism among industry leaders about a recovery in the sector, as retail sales are rising. But consumers remain cash-strapped and value-oriented.

"The recovery is real, but it's also frustratingly very slow," he said.

And another potential threat to recovery is looming, he added.

If gas prices continue to escalate, economists say that pattern "will truly spook the consumer back into his bunker," he said.

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