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Maurin relates saga of Hammond Square

By Joan Davis

**Stirling Properties** owner and Chairman Jimmy Maurin said he never intended to buy the dying Hammond Square Mall from former owner Sizeler Properties.

But a war with the owners over a right of way on C.M. Fagan and a sudden change of leadership presented Stirling Properties with an opportunity to buy the outdated 435,000-square-foot retail development, and for a developer vested in his community, Maurin said he couldn't pass it up.

Maurin told Kiwanis Club members Tuesday the "saga of Hammond Square" started seven years ago when Stirling acquired 40 acres near the mall to build a movie theater.

The developer had plans then to eventually build a shopping center to the east of the theater. The plans set off a dispute with Sizeler.

"The mall owners didn't like me. I don't think they liked anybody," he said.

Sizeler closed off C.M. Fagan, and Maurin said he sued and went as far as the Louisiana Supreme Court and "won at all levels."

Fagan Drive was opened. A new chairman at Sizeler later approached him about buying the whole mall, trumping his plan to build "a little strip mall." He bought the mall in 2006.

"It is arguably the most important project in my lifetime," he said of the mall redevelopment. "I take this personally."

Richard Cyr, who was vice president and director of operations for Sizeler Properties from 1994 to 2000, is managing the project, Maurin said.

The perfect person for the project, he "knows where the bodies are buried," meaning he knows first-hand the difficulties involved in creating the open-air "lifestyle center" from the dual-level enclosed mall, Maurin said.

Along with properties along Southwest Railroad Avenue, including the area of Walgreen's and Blockbuster and an area north of C.M. Fagan, Stirling has 100 acres all told, some of the choicest real estate in the parish.

But selling the mall idea to future tenants hasn't been easy, Maurin said.



**KIWANIS SPEECH** — "I take this personally," businessman Jimmy Maurin of Hammond tells members of the local Kiwanis club Tuesday. He was speaking in reference to the Hammond Square project which he calls "the most important project in my lifetime." Daily Star Photo by Joan Davis

Building in St. Tammany, as they did, was a lot easier.

The image of Hammond as a low-income shopping area has not helped. Neither did Sizeler's failure to care for or update the mall in the three decades of its existence. The dual-level design was flawed, with anchors on the bottom level. The designer created the same design in five other cities, and they've all been torn down years ago.

Many residents gave up and shopped out of parish.

Then Hammond became the recipient of unexpected good fortune -15,000 hurricane evacuees drove up housing starts from 200 to 300 a year to 12,931 current active and planned housing starts in Tangipahoa Parish, the numbers the result of a residential market study conducted by Stirling with the parish.

"The opportunity became ripe to recreate a dying mall that would be viable for generations to come," Maurin said.

The "lifestyle center" design fits the modern concerns for convenience, he said. Shoppers want to park near a store and run in, not park in some far-flung parking lot and walk great distances.

Dillard's now has its own water chilling tower to provide air conditioning, and Sears and Rite Aid will acquire their own systems before the heavy demolition of the central mall starts in September, Cyr said.

He showed drawings of the new facades Dillard's, Rite Aid and Sears are proposing for their renovated stores.

Top priority in the coming months is the infrastructure enhancements.

The city in a cooperative endeavor with Stirling is pumping \$15 million into improvements to handle projected increased traffic in the area, Maurin said.

Southwest Railroad Avenue will increase from five to seven lanes with a dual left turning lane, and there will be an additional lane on the off-ramp at the interstate exit.

Magnolia and Bauerle are being widened and extended. Road work should be complete between May and October of 2008.

"Hopefully, congestion will dissipate by the time the array of tenants are opening their stores," Maurin said.

On schedule so far, J.C. Penney should finish construction in October and Home Depot June 30, 2008. Main street, which has not as yet been named, will have a grand opening at Christmas 2008 or spring 2009, Maurin said.

There will be a total of 65 tenants in the 900,000 square foot development.

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