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THE NEW HAMMOND SQUARE: Opening for Business



BY *Joe Luna*

One by one the new stores in the resurrected Hammond Square are coming to life and bringing with them a new sense of economic enthusiasm that is spilling out into many other areas of the city.

The first wave of stores is open, including Best Buy and the Santa Fe Steakhouse, and the rest of Hammond Square is reportedly not far behind. Once completed Hammond Mayor Mayson Foster says it will provide about 1,000 new jobs for the area, some of which have

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already been filled.

Already the area is feeling the economic impact of Best Buy and the Santa Fe Steakhouse in the fact that they have put over 250 locals to work and the promise of more jobs with the remaining

openings is a sure thing.

With these prospects on the horizon, the whole city is greatly anticipating when this project will be completed. Stirling Property Officials say, they will not have to wait much longer. "By the

end of the year we should be substantially completed with all of the exterior and only subject to the interior build-out of the individual tenants," Stirling Properties Executive Vice President Grady Brame said. At that time it should not be long before the rest of

Target and TJ Maxx, Café Roma, Phil's Grill, Books A Million, Shoe Department, Hibbett Sports, Zales, Footlocker, Great American Cookie, Paris Parker and GNC, are on the slate to open.

The openings that have occurred and the ones that are still on the hori-

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the mall is open for business.

Even though the mall has not yet reached its maximum potential as a new economic center for the city and the parish, it is already in the process of securing the revenue and foot traffic that will make it a prosperous venture for both Stirling Properties and the city itself.

With Sears, Rite Aid, Dillard's, AMC Theatre, and Chase Bank being open for some time, they have already had the opportunity to greatly contribute to the economic prosperity of the area.

Now, as JC Penney, Raising Canes,

zone are reportedly on schedule for what Stirling Properties expected, once they revised their original plans. "When we originally did this project, we had hoped for a spring and summer opening for most of our retailers, but that ended up being backed up to a summer and fall '09 opening for a lot of them," Brame said. "So to look back on it, the project is probably slightly behind what the original schedule was, but still on track."

Brame considers Stirling Properties fortunate in the fact that they are staying so close to the original schedule as many

"What we are trying to do is service all of the Hammond area," Brame said. The stores are meant to target various age groups and demographics from kids to adults and any other consumers in the area. "We provide statistics and demographics on the Hammond area and the actual draw of what we call the new Hammond Square."

Santa Fe Steakhouse, Best Buy and Verizon Wireless join the ranks, and the mall comes closer to its ultimate completion, the full measure of the economic impact will soon be determined.

In addition to these and the stores that have been part of the area for some time, other stores and restaurants such as, Albasha Greek and Lebanese Café,

competing projects in the area are falling further and further behind.

While some of these stores will be returning to their place in Hammond Square following the previous demolition of the mall, many will be first-time additions to the city's economic climate. "What we are trying to do is service all of the Hammond area," he said. The stores

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are meant to target various age groups and demographics from kids to adults and any other consumers in the area. "We provide statistics and demographics on the Hammond area and the actual draw of what we call the new Hammond Square," he said. "We make those presentations to local, regional, and national retailers."

In essence, with many of the stores including; Best Buy and Target, Stirling Properties seeks to fill in the gaps between stores they already have in the area. Brame gave the example of Best Buy being in Covington and in Baton Rouge. Stirling then provided that company with the demographics that show that filling the large mileage gap between those two stores would be viable in Hammond.

Some of the stores that Stirling is hoping they will be able to attract to Hammond Square in the future include; Gap, Gap Kids, Banana Republic, and Old Navy. "We have been in contact with

them because we believe one or more of those concepts would be great for the Hammond area," he said. "Those aren't the only ones, we are going after a num-

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ber of different retailers such as that."

One of the things that seem to make the Hammond market so viable for national chains is the fact Louisiana seems to continue to be insulated from much of

the damage being wreaked through the rest of the nation as the sagging economy continues to plague businesses.

Brame said that despite the fact that

the economy was in a better position when Stirling made economic projections for the new Hammond Square, those projections are continuing to hold strong. "We've seen, particularly in Hammond,

there has been an increase in retail sales on a year-to-year basis," he said. "We kind of feel like things have bottomed out and things are starting to get better. It's probably going to be a slow recovery, but we think it will be a recovery."

Even with the uncertainty that has come with the financial crisis, the outlook of the new Hammond Square, in the eyes of its architects, remains steady enough for them to continue to invest \$70 million in the project.

However, the new Hammond Square will not only have an economic impact on the city and the parish by the merchandise and tax revenue it accrues, but it will also reportedly bring a new sense of development to the area that will make other investors more likely to choose Hammond to set up shop. "What Hammond Square is providing is an image that we're no longer a location

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with a torn down mall," Mayor Mayson Foster said. "But we're now a location with a vibrant shopping center area. So just from an image perspective it has been a tremendous opportunity."

As for the rest of the area around the new Hammond Square, city officials say there are a number of possibilities on the horizon. "There are several things that are happening in

that area," Foster said. The city is currently working with the Department Of Transportation and Development to try and alleviate the congestion felt near the truck stops on Veterans Highway. "The D.O.T.D has proposed three traffic circles which would help to alleviate the traffic coming to a stand-still right there in that location," he said. "One of those roundabouts is going to be at the intersection of Club Deluxe Road and Veterans Highway."

Foster indicated that the surrounding areas such as properties on Club Deluxe Road and C.M. Fagan will provide many opportunities for new businesses to spring up close to the new Hammond Square in the future. "We have seen a small shopping center that has already been developed and I think we will probably see additional growth particularly after Hammond Square gets up and running to

influx of business, and the military base that is nearing completion in the area, will keep Hammond from feeling the full force of the economic downturn.

Much of that will reportedly depend on what happens with the budget cuts to Southeastern Louisiana University; however the city remains hopeful that Hammond and the parish will continue to rise above the economic turbulence that has hit the nation. "People are still looking at the area," Foster said. "We have had several people that have reviewed the available land with Hammond industrial board and our economic development group. Overall I'm still extremely optimistic that we are going to hold our own."

Other city agencies such as the Hammond Chamber of Commerce also welcome the new Hammond Square with open arms as they reflect on what it will mean to the city.

"When the mall left in the beginning it kind of took away from our community and now with the mall coming back, there's a new excitement around town. It is going to be a great boost for our local economy," Chamber Director Charlotte Lenoir said.

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its full capacity," he said.

As for the general look of the city, anyone can drive around and see the numerous beautification projects and business remodels that have come in recent years and months, ever since the mall construction was announced and began.

Foster does see a correlation between the new Hammond Square and this remodeling trend that businesses around the city seem to be embracing. He believes that is also a new image perspective to which city businesses are subscribing.

He is also hopeful that this new

"When the mall left in the beginning it kind of took away from our community and now with the mall coming back, there's a new excitement around town. It is going to be a great boost for our local economy," Chamber Director Charlotte Lenoir said. "We're very excited about the Hammond Square development."

With the excitement of the stores opening, new jobs coming to town, a new revitalized spirit, and a multitude of new possibilities on the horizon, this certainly is an exhilarating time for the city of Hammond as it presses forward into a prosperous future. 🌱