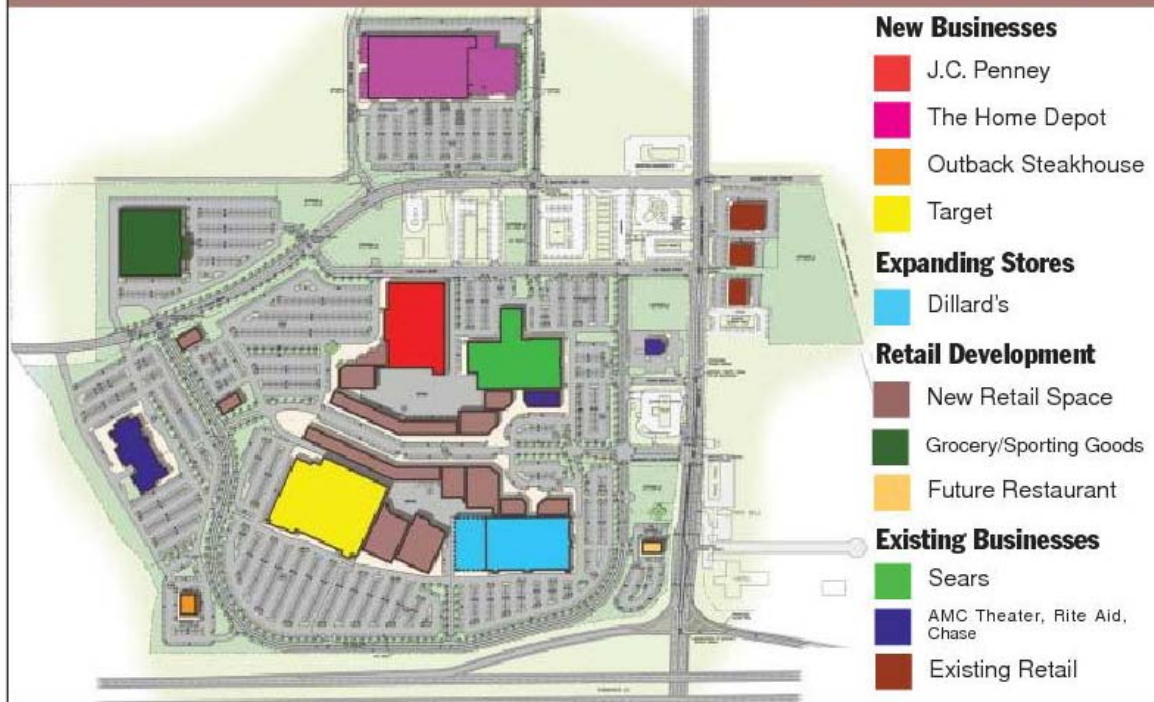


SHOPPING SUPERSITE



Maurin unveils major retail center

By Polly H. Greene
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J.C. Penney is returning to Hammond. Coming with the major apparel retailer will be newcomers to the area - Home Depot and Target.

That's just part of the announcement made today during the Hammond Business Expo when Jimmy Maurin, chairman of Stirling Properties, revealed the redevelopment plan for Hammond Square.

Dillard's, Sears, AMC Theatre, Chase Bank and Rite Aid will remain at the mall while work will transform the 30-year-old center from a small, enclosed regional mall to an open-air lifestyle center.

The project includes increasing the square footage of the now 431,000-square-foot property to approximately 850,000 square feet. Once completed, the facility will encompass more than 100 acres, making it the largest retail development project in Tangipahoa Parish, Maurin said. The project represents an investment of more than \$100,000 million in public and private funds. The project is expected to create 1,200 permanent jobs and around 900 construction jobs and generate approximately \$240 million in retail sales per year.

The first phase will entail demolishing the existing structure except for the spaces occupied by Sears and Dillard's, Rite Aid and Chase. Dillard's will expand by 25,000 square feet increasing its total space from 70,404 square feet to more than 95,000 square feet. Work is expected to begin April 1 with new tenant openings throughout 2008.

Letters of intent have been secured by Stirling Properties for the Target, Home Depot and J.C. Penney, Maurin told The Daily Star earlier today. While the three have no legally binding deal as of yet, they are stores Stirling has dealt with on a regular basis and they have expressed interest in the project since the beginning.

An aerial view of the plan shows the Home Depot north of the existing mall facing West Minnesota Park behind McDonald's and across from Jeanne Maureen's. Maurin hopes to secure a large grocery chain or sporting goods store for a site at the juncture of West Minnesota Park and C.M. Fagan Drive.

In looking at the mall's entrance, Sears will be at the same location with Penney's occupying an 85,361-square-foot facility west of Sears. Dillard's will be the anchor nearest U.S. Highway 51 and I-12 and Target will face the interstate west of Dillard's.

A three-lane city street will loop around the shopping facility and a main street will run through the center allowing shoppers easy access to the the smaller retail stores.

Restaurants are a big attraction to any shopping center, and Stirling Properties has already started negotiations with Outback Steakhouse and other restaurants expressing interest.

A press packet for the Hammond Square Re-Development includes an online survey conducted by The Daily Star on what residents want to shop and eat at in Hammond. The 127 people who responded to the survey mentioned 117 retailers and 36 restaurants.

All those mentioned in the survey will be contacted, Maurin said. Outback and Old Navy have shown big interest in the development and negotiations have already begun.

The people in Hammond have been shopping in Covington since Stirling Covington opened, Maurin said.

"Nobody should drive 22 miles to shop," he said.

Ten years ago, Stirling began acquiring acreage around the mall, buying about 50 acres of land, Maurin said. "All we intended to do was build peripheral retail around the mall, but the plans got delayed in the court and mired in lawsuit after lawsuit.

"We never intended to buy the mall, but by the time all the lawsuits were resolved and the leadership at Seizler changed the mall was on the block. So we bought it , and now we are talking a totally new concept," he said. "The mall was the thing 30 years ago. But the small regional mall is disappearing. Consumers want something different today. This is more in line."

In reflecting back over the years of strife and development around the mall, Maurin finds a silver lining.

"All the toil and strife we and the city went through, we hope at the end of the day we end up with a better offering than what we would of had 10 years ago," he said. "We will be bringing to Hammond a lot of retailers that should have been in Hammond already."

The new open-air lifestyle center has not just been a Stirling Properties project.

Mayor Mayson Foster, the city council, city engineers and planners have all been working on the project, Maurin said.

"The city of Hammond and Mayor Foster have been wonderful. They have encouraged us and given us confidence to move forward," Maurin said. "The project has been well-discussed and well-orchestrated with the city.

"Plus its a hometown deal. Stirling was founded here. I'm a hometown boy and all the hometown bankers (Parish National Bank, First Guaranty Bank and Florida Parishes Bank) are all involved. It truly is a local effort."