

**Hammond Square's Main Street opens with much fanfare, celebration**

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**HAMMOND---**"The best is yet to come," was a theme Thursday afternoon as developers, local leaders, and hundreds of shoppers lined Main Street inside the new Hammond Square development which opened a host of new shops in a ribbon cutting ceremony that drew hundreds of people to the city's largest retail center.

Developer Jimmy Maurin, CEO of Stirling Properties, told the crowd Thursday afternoon that the Main Street ribbon cutting represented the "culmination" of 10 years of negotiations, legal trevails, and ultimately, demolition of the former Hammond Square Mall which eventually led to the construction and opening of more than 100 acres of retail space in the heart of Hammond.

Maurin took centerstage Thursday afternoon in his hometown, as he recalled in detail the struggles he and partners Bobby Maurin and Calvin Fayard, endured in their attempts to bring much-needed retail growth to this I-12 city.

Maurin said the project was "deeply personal," and that his goal was simple--he wanted to do something to help put his hometown on the map. Over the decade, the partnership bought property around the old Hammond Square Mall and offered to buy the mall site from former owners, only to find themselves strapped in a long-running legal battle over a "spite-strip" and other issues. But after much time in the courts, and after a major roadway leading into the center had been closed, it was the partnership between commerce and government--particularly the administration of Hammond Mayor Mayson Foster and the City Council--that brought an end to the court drama and ultimately led to the sale of the property to Stirling which would completely demolish and build a new retail center from the ground up.

"It's been a soap opera," Maurin said, adding, "a soap opera with a happy ending."

Maurin said the partnership with the City was invaluable, as was the commitment of the three lending institutions that worked with the project even in the darkest hours of last year's national financial collapse. Maurin said the banks urged him to keep moving forward, regardless of what the markets were doing. In the end, the Stirling CEO said Hammond Square was finished, while many other projects across the country--even some locally along the I-12 corridor--came to a screeching halt. Maurin said he could not have continued without the support and commitment of those banks.

Maurin joked that he would have to borrow some of his remarks from boyhood friend Foster, saying that the opening day was truly an occasion to remark, "What a beautiful day in Hammond, America!"

Meanwhile Foster, who took the stage after Maurin, agreed, saying that not only was it a "beautiful day in Hammond," but even moreso, "the best is yet to come." Foster, who received applause from the crowd as he congratulated Maurin on the opening, said that he personally "get goosebumps when I look around and see what's here now." The mayor also recounted some of the retail center's history, reminding participants that it took years of negotiations to bring improvements to the once-failed site, and he congratulated not only Stirling's team, but also the Hammond City Council and the city department leaders who stepped up to bring much-needed infrastructure improvements to the site to make it a reality. Foster said the City invested more than \$12 million in improvements to the center, and that without those enhancements, the Hammond Square dream could not have become a reality.

Maurin presented Foster with a framed set of photos from the demolition and the ultimate construction and substantial occupation of the new Hammond Square site. Maurin told Foster that the City was as much an owner in the site as the investors who had put their names on the line in developing the retail establishment.

Hammond City Council President Mike Williams spoke, introducing all of the past and present council members who, he said, "didn't flinch" when asked to step up and partner with Hammond Square. Williams and Parish President Gordon Burgess both spoke to the hope that local shoppers will be able to find their needs met in Tangipahoa Parish, and that unlike what shoppers have done for the last decade, people will come to Hammond to shop, rather than leave the parish and take their sales tax dollars elsewhere.

After a series of local speakers, the developers, dignitaries and the public joined together for the grand ribbon cutting, followed by a second-line march down Main Street to a private reception at Albasha Greek and Lebanese restaurant. Well-wishers were still on-site for the reception some two hours later, as residents and business owners alike dined on buffet-style dishes from the Hammond Square shop merchants and listened to music in the crisp fall evening.

Maurin said there will be activities all weekend long as the shops continue with grand opening specials and other events to celebrate the final phase of Hammond Square.

Action News 17 will have interviews with a number of local dignitaries who were present for Thursday's event. Those interviews will be posted exclusively on [www.actionnews17.com](http://www.actionnews17.com) this weekend before airing later next week on our local newscast in Tangipahoa Parish.

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