

Exit 60 opens in Covington area

By *Debbie Glover*
St. Tammany News

The formal opening of the exit that will carry shoppers to Nord du Lac shopping center north of Interstate 12 and the Stirling Covington center south of I-12 took place Wednesday morning with limited fanfare.

The exits and access roads will allow motorists to bypass the I-12 Louisiana/Highway 21 intersection and travel between shopping centers without setting tires on La. 21.

The roadway has been open to traffic for the past few weeks.

Colonial Pinnacle Nord du Lac, the 1 million-square-foot project that has been on hold due to the economy, will reportedly resume construction in early spring 2010, said Ken Marshall of Colonial Properties Trust, owner and developer of the project.

Marshall said they “feel good about the project” and are talking with potential lessees for the lifestyle center.

Mired in controversy from the beginning, the project has been at a standstill when several retailers had to back out of the project due to the economy. Now that the economy is recovering, St. Tammany Parish President Kevin Davis said the permit office has been receiving requests for permitting information from various retailers and restaurants for this particular project.

Some of the calls have come from businesses such as Kohl’s, Academy Sports, Cracker Barrel, PF Chang’s, Olive Garden and Hobby Lobby.

Marshall said that no one has committed to them as of yet, but admitted that interest by retailers, restaurants and others has been renewed. Marshall said that thus far, about 300,000 square feet has been committed. The project is now projected to open October 2010.

Total square footage in original plans was about a 1 million square feet at a cost of \$200 million to accommodate 115 tenants.



Officials at the ribbon cutting for exit 60 off I-12 for Nord du Lac and Sterling Covington shopping centers are, from left: Hal Lassen of Brasfield & Gorrie; Tommy Buckel of Duplantis Design Group; Mark Salvetti and Townsend Underhill, Stirling Properties; Ken Marshall, Colonial Properties Trust; Bruce Wainer; Richard Price, Richard Price Contracting Co., LLC; St. Tammany Parish President Kevin Davis; Richard Lambert, Richard C. Lambert Consultants; Bill Oiler, St. Tammany Parish CAO; Al Hamauei, parish councilman, and Franz Zemmer and Lloyd Luton, Richard Lambert Consultants. (Staff Photo by Debbie Glover)

Bruce Wainer, owner of an adjacent 150 acres said he still hopes to develop or sell the remaining acreage. Wainer said that he is pursuing compatible uses such as entertainment but wants to put together a master plan for the property. As a result, his plans are currently on hold until Colonial's plans are complete, because his property will be directly impacted by the lifestyle center.

An earlier attempt to rezone the area to allow big box stores as commercial highway H-C designation in the parish's comprehensive rezoning plan did not go through, but Wainer said he has enough land available for that or other projects.

At this time, the question of big box stores, such as Sam's Wholesale Club or Wal-Mart is not being pursued. Big box stores traditionally have a higher square footage and derive their revenue by providing discount prices and selling at a volume rather than price points.

The former rest stop north of I-12 provides a road that loops under the interstate and connects with the Stirling Covington Center on the other side of the interstate.

Cost of the road is \$10.5 million with the two landowners, Stirling Properties and Colonial Properties Trust, putting in \$2.5 million for the project. The Tchefuncte Interchange, as parish officials call it, was paid by road bonds specific for this purpose.

Controversy surrounding the development by nearby residents included a stress on traffic infrastructure on the then two-lane La. 21. Traffic density is of particular concern to residents of the Flowers Estates, located east of La. 21 and north of the Nord du Lac project. Several businesses and strip malls, including restaurants and retail developments have built along that side of La. 21, many that now abut residential back yards.

In order to alleviate traffic problems, Louisiana Department of Transportation officials are planning to begin other infrastructure improvements to the area soon. The widening of Louisiana Highway 21 north of I-12 to Bootlegger Road is almost complete. Long range plans by DOTD and the parish would provide a four-lane La. 21, including widening of the bridge, to Eighth Avenue in Covington.

South of I-12, planned projects include the intersection of Brewster Road and La. 21 which will allow better access to La. 21 in both directions and Brewster Road into the Stirling Covington shopping center.

Improvements to the I-12/La. 21 interchange are also planned.

Richard Lambert Consultants were the engineers on the project and Richard Price Contracting Co. were the contractors. Duplantis Design Group was the civil engineers.