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Northshore officials hoping new stores boost Christmas sales WWL-TV - Online

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ST. TAMMANY, La. -- The battle is on to attract holiday shoppers, and there's some new ammunition for the fight on the Northshore.

Several new retail outlets including a Kohl's department store and an Academy Sports and Outdoors are now open in the Nord Du Lac Shopping Center in Covington, but that shopping center was supposed to be full by now.

When the national economy fell apart, it shut down major retail projects on both the west and the east side of St. Tammany.

St. Tammany leaders said Wednesday, national retailers want to locate in their parish, but simply can't right now.

"We've talked to the national retailers," said St. Tammany Parish President Kevin Davis. "They know per-capita income and those things. There is the interest in being here on the Northshore, but the obstacle of the national issues that we're experiencing with financing and the like has created problems for them."

Two years ago, Davis commissioned a study which found 65 percent of the people people from St. Tammany spend during the Christmas Season is spent outside St. Tammany Parish. Now, he hopes, with some new stores open this year, St. Tammany can keep more of that money.

"We hope those numbers will get down closer to 50 percent," Davis said.

Meanwhile, just 20 miles west from the Nord Du Lac on I-12, Tangipahoa Parish leaders hope rapid development in the Hammond Square Shopping Center will help them attract shoppers.

"What Hammond Square has done for us is, it has actually brought the economy back to Tangipahoa Parish," Hammond Mayor Mayson Foster said. "We were losing so much sales tax to other areas."

Because of the national economic crisis, many municipalities nationwide are down 20 to 25 percent in sales taxes. Largely because of the expansion of Hammond Square, that is not the case in Hammond.

"We are able to hold our own," Foster said. "We are almost exactly where we wanted to be in our budget."

The city of Hammond actually invested heavily in the Hammond Square project, putting up roughly \$10 million for roads and infrastructure. They expect to recoup that investment with increased sales taxes.

"You know, I'm one of the few people that smiles when you see gridlock in the city of Hammond," Foster said, "because that means people are here shopping, spending money."

Hammond Square has four more retail outlet signed up to open in the spring, but still has more spaces to fill. Foster hopes that will happen as the national economy improves.

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It's the same story in St. Tammany, where the restaurant world is catching on.

Both Olive Garden and Cracker Barrel now have permits to build in the Nord Du Lac, but retailers are still lagging, especially high end retailers, as the 2010 Christmas battle begins.