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Open-air shopping center meets region's needs

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No matter who is discussing the open-air shopping center coming to Madison County, that word that pops up on a frequent basis, from a retail standpoint, is "underserved."

"It has been evident for a number of years that the residents in Richmond, Madison County and the other 10 counties that make up our micropolitan region have been underserved when it comes to retail, entertainment and dining options," David Evans, Richmond's city manager, said.

When completed, the 120-acre Richmond Centre will be the largest shopping destination between Lexington and Knoxville, according to developers Crosland, LLC of Charlotte and Greenville-based Carolina Holdings, Inc. Located on the northwest corner of I-75 and Barnes Mill Road, directly off exit 87, the mixed-use shopping center has been approved for 800,000 square feet of retail space featuring 12 outparcels, 15.5 acres for two hotels and 60,000 square feet of office space. Major anchors include department store giants Belk and JCPenney, Cinemark Theatre and Home Depot, all scheduled to open in 2008, and Meijer, which will open in the spring of 2009. Although not ready for announcement yet, several nationally recognized casual sit-down dining restaurants have also committed to opening stores in the Centre.

"This location provides excellent access and visibility from I-75," Britt Goodson, Carolina Holdings project manager, said, "which is exactly what consumers and retailers are looking for — especially large anchor stores such as the ones committed to anchoring this shopping center."

The old real estate saying of "location, location, location" held particularly true when the developers were doing area and demographic research on potential shopping center sites.

"We already had several things going for us when we trying to attract new retailers," Connie Lawson, Richmond's mayor, said. "We had the infrastructure in place, a large area of undeveloped land near the interstate, and 300,000-plus potential shoppers, 60 percent of whom live south and/or east of Madison County but are already shopping here."

Goodson said that those potential shoppers from outside Madison County played a large role in the companies' decision to locate here.

"There is no large retail offering on the I-75 corridor between Lexington and Knoxville, so it was obvious that people from Madison County on south were being underserved. As we looked around, it was also easy to see all the roads leading from the south and east to I-75. By locating shopping closer to this market, we could, in effect, help shoppers cut 45 minutes or more off the time they spend just driving to a shopping area. In addition, the visibility from I-75 supported the open-air development concept, which is our forte, as well as being one of the hottest trends in the retail development industry."

According to Goodson, shopping center development has been trending toward the open-air concept for about 10 years.

"Society and lifestyle are steering this industry," Goodson said, "and like a huge ship,

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it takes time to turn, so we've seen the trend for a decade, but it has really ramped up over the past five years."

He added that consumer shopping patterns and habits are the driving forces behind the kind of shopping center developed for a particular area as well the kind of retailers that will occupy the store fronts.

"Shoppers want convenience and accessibility," Goodson said. "For the most part, they don't have time to stroll through an enclosed mall, wondering if the stores they want to visit are in this place or somewhere else. They're looking for the ability to recognize a need, spot the store to supply that need, and then get in and out easily. The open-air concept lets them pull up to that store from the outside and go in. However, because shopping centers like Richmond Centre are designed to be pedestrian-friendly, shoppers can also walk from store to store. It may be hard to believe, but consumer research shows that convenience even outweighs climate."

The kind of mixed-use shopping destination that will become Richmond Centre is also often called a lifestyle center, meaning that it can meet a variety of society's lifestyle needs.

For example, having a grocery store anchor is not typical of the traditional mall, but one is found in nearly every new lifestyle mall. Why? Because shoppers like the convenience of going to one area and finding all the things they need.

"Shopping is the number one thing to do for recreation," Lawson said. "Our goals are to meet the needs of our residents, and offering them a place with many shopping, dining and entertainment options helps us meet those goals."

Goodson added that he and Carolina Holdings actually view Richmond Centre as three shopping centers in one.

"First, you have your daily shopping needs, and for that, you need a grocery store. And since there isn't one on the west side of the county right now, Meijer will fill that void. Second, you have shoppers who will want and need to shop at traditional mall stores, so that's where retailers such as JCPenney and Belk fit in. Third is the lifestyle component, and that's where the restaurants and entertainment venues like Cinemark fit in.

"When you put all three of these components together, you make Richmond Centre a destination experience rather than a place shoppers might go, get one thing and leave. Options like these encourage people to come do their shopping, then have a meal and stick around for the entertainment."

Richmond Centre's design will encourage this destination experience by incorporating many of the signature characteristics for which Crosland has become known, such as village shops, a fountain plaza, hardscaped and landscaped areas, outdoor dining and oversized pedestrian pathways.

The mix of traditional and discount department stores, category-specific retailers not currently represented in the market, a bookstore and pet store, a stadium-seating theatre, hotels and casual dining restaurants also meets many of the objectives of the economic development group in Madison County regarding business and industry recruitment.

"There's no doubt that this shopping center will be good for the city and the county economically," Lawson said. "Not only will there be a positive impact in terms of job creation, but our infrastructure will benefit from the influx of payroll and sales taxes. There's also a quality-of-life issue. Our current residents will be able to enjoy the variety in shopping and dining, and we can use this as another tool when we market the area to potential residents and companies thinking about relocating."

Evans agreed. "Having this shopping center fills a need right here in our micropolitan region, but it's also good for the entire Bluegrass region. With the spending population in the Bluegrass, the tourism, etc., there's more than enough retail business to go around."

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