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## Future of the former Cincinnati Mall in limbo — again



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**FAIRFIELD** — The fate of the former Cincinnati Mall — one of the region's largest enclosed mall properties with approximately 1.5 million-square-feet of mostly empty space — is again in limbo, with the latest redevelopment plans scratched.

Now known as Forest Fair Village, the mall so large that it straddles Fairfield and Forest Park, was working earlier this year with Prudential Commercial Real Estate. Plans were to turn the center into a mix of business, recreational and office space. However, that company is no longer working with the mall.

"Effective Oct. 1, our listing agreement expired with World Properties for the Cincinnati Mall and we opted not to renew or extend. Unfortunately, I am not able to comment further at this time," said David Mussari, a managing broker at Prudential, in an email.

Delmer Helton, who has been the mall's general manager for about seven months, said the mall is in the process of interviewing new leasing agents and hopes to have a new one in place around the new year.

"We did have Prudential as a leasing agency, but they just at some point they weren't bringing enough to the table. So they (owner Worldwide Properties) are searching out new agencies to list our spaces," he said.

In the meantime, the mall is focusing on maintenance issues that have dogged the property.

"During the course of the dreadful winter we had last year, I guess mall management had several areas of the mall where they had turned the electricity off. Therefore, some of those areas did not have heat," said Helton.

The mall also had drainage and piping issues in the garage and in parts of the mall itself; that damage has been repaired, along with leaks in the roof, he said.

Forest Fair Village crosses Butler and Hamilton county lines, sitting partly in Fairfield and partly in Forest Park.

In its 25-year history, the mall has had at least six owners. The current owner, World Properties LLC of New York, bought the mall at 600 Cincinnati Mills Drive in 2010.

Anchor tenants include Bass Pro Shops, Kohl's, and Babies"R"Us. Bass Pro Shops announced last year plans to build a new store in West Chester Twp. off Union Centre Boulevard. The sporting goods retailer said it will relocate the Fairfield store to the newly built location in 2016.

Helton noted that The Screens at Cincinnati Mall had replaced Danbarry Cinemas as the discount movie theater at the mall this fall. The owner there, Ravindranath Kotti, said he was upgrading the auditoriums with digital projection, with two already completed. He hopes eventually to turn the theater into a first-run house.

Helton was also negotiating with a nightclub that might occupy the mall, similar to the former Metropolis, although these are not the same owners. A 10-year lease is in the offing, he said.

Several problems, including property maintenance, are affecting the mall's ability to attract more tenants, said Chris Hodge, first vice president for CBRE's Retail Services group in greater Cincinnati. CBRE is a commercial real estate firm.

"The problem with the site is the entity that owns it, they bought it after several failures and purchased it at a pretty low dollar amount, but they're not based here. I don't know that they have the resources, expertise, logistics," Hodge said. "It's obviously configured as a major mall, so how do you fix that?"

The good news is it's located on about 70 acres of prime real estate with Interstate 275 visibility, Hodge said.

"I'm not sure exactly what you do with it. I think it should become a mixed-used development where you have retail, residential, flex office," he said.

"I'm not sure that the carcass can be re-utilized," said Hodge, noting, however, that he's not an engineer or architect. "In my opinion only, I think it's going to come to a point where all or a majority of it needs to come down."

Tim Bachman, the development director for the city of Fairfield, thinks the mall might still be salvaged, but it will take a concerted effort by the owners and the leasing agents to market the mall in a new way.

"We are of the opinion that maybe it's time to look at different uses. I'm not sure what the mall people are thinking, but the mall can't continue to lure brokers for retail," he said.

The Mills group, which once operated the mall, had been successful with retail in the past, but not even they could make retail work at the site, said Bachman.

"The market is not accepting retail. I don't know if it's saturation, but they need a tenant with long-term viability," he added.

Paul Brehm, the economic development director for Forest Park, said, "I don't think anyone's happy with the status of the facility. I think they are looking for options to do something to improve that situation. I think the burden is clearly on the property owner to come up with an effective strategy to reposition the site ... there's a lot of potential for this property here."

The mall is in a unique position because it has been on "a roller coaster ride," Brehm said.

"The selection of this brokerage team is incredibly important. Exactly what they need is a new partnership to help them really find a true solution for this. I think the days of trying to put a band-aid on this and inch along in the market (are gone)," he said.

#### **Ice arena once proposed for site**

Former property general manager Karla Ellsworth previously announced in 2011 plans to redevelop the mall as a mix-used family attraction. Talks were to bring a hotel, ice arena and amusement center to the shopping center.

That hasn't happened and problems with delinquent taxes — millions in delinquent property taxes are owed to county governments — and payments on a bond issued a decade ago under a previous owner are holding up the mall's development, Ellsworth previously told this newspaper. However, Forest Park officials contend it's not tax bills that are causing problems. Rather, Forest Park Community Development Director Chris Anderson said in 2013 the property was suffering due to lack of investment by out-of-state owners.

On Black Friday, the busiest shopping day of the year, only a handful of visitors came to the mall, with a few families stopping to chat with Santa as Christmas music echoed through the halls. Paul and Sherry Green of West Chester Twp. were among the few shoppers.

"You have to have an effective mix of retail establishments that are mutually supportive," said Paul Green.

"We thought it was pretty encouraging when we heard there was going to be a skating rink and some more development that way, and apparently that all fell through," said Sherry Green. "It looks like the place next to Foot Locker (Arcade Legacy) attracts the teenagers."

#### **Local retail competition**

Meanwhile, another enclosed mall on Butler County's borders is also struggling to be redeveloped. Currently, Middletown's Towne Mall Galleria, located near the city's Ohio 122 interchange with Interstate 75, sits half empty.

A California investment group under the name SA Mary Ohio LLC purchased Towne Mall in October 2012.

Towne Mall redevelopment plans scored a big win this past summer when Burlington Coat Factory announced it would open a store at the site. One of the owners, George Ragheb said at the time that Burlington was a strong anchor tenant that would attract more tenants.

However, since then, Burlington announced in October the store's opening was delayed from fall 2014 to next year due to unforeseen construction delays.

All the while, construction is continuing on the \$350 million mega retail complex Liberty Center, set to open fall 2015 at the intersection of Interstate 75, Liberty Way and Ohio 129.

One of the largest developments in Butler County history, Liberty Center will feature more than 1 million-square-feet of development, including 75,000-square-feet of Class A Office, 60,000-square-feet of restaurant and dining and 150,000-square-feet of upscale residential. Signed anchor tenants include Dillard's department store, Dick's Sporting Goods, and dinner-and-movie theater CineBistro, as well as AC Hotels by Marriott.

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