

A ghost of Christmas past

Fashion Square mall could be seeing its last holiday shopping season as plans to redevelop property loom



Fashion Square mall opened in 1973, and customers recall it being a bustling place where people would have to circle the parking lot to find a place to park. (Sarah Espedido/Orlando Sentinel)

BY AUSTIN FULLER

Beverly Haun remembers a time when it was hard to find a place to park at Orlando Fashion Square mall.

“At Christmastime, you literally had to drive around,” the 57-year-old Orlando resident said.

Parking wasn't a problem on Tuesday, when the few shoppers at the mall had plenty of room to spread out in its halls. Families still waited for photographs with Santa Claus, and decorations still hung from the ceiling, but the festive scene was interrupted by [an abundance of empty stores](#).

This could be the last holiday shopping season at the Colonial Drive mall, as developers have [acquired the land underneath the building](#) with hopes to tear it down and replace it with a new open-air center.

Chuck Whittall and Daryl Carter purchased the 46 acres northeast of downtown in September, with Whittall saying at the time he hoped to start redevelopment in a year. The two still have to reach a deal with Bancorp, the owner of the mall's building.

“If all the dominoes fall, a year from now's not unrealistic,” Carter said Monday. “But on the other hand, things can happen along the way.”

The [new center could include apartments, retail, a hotel and a movie theater](#). Whittall previously said Macy's, which is already at Fashion Square, is interested in being part of the redevelopment, but a spokeswoman for the retailer said the company does not have any real estate plans to announce at this time.

“The market is excited,” Carter said. “The city is excited. The people in Central Florida who live nearby are excited to see something new and vibrant happen there.”

As national retailers depart malls across the country, new uses have come to their properties. In nearby Seminole County, a developer is proposing [tearing down the former Macy's at Oviedo Mall](#) to build apartments and a hotel.

At Fashion Square, the former Sears has already been demolished and replaced with a Floor & Decor and a space that was supposed to be an [Orchard Supply Hardware before Lowe's Companies discontinued that brand](#). The Macy's, JCPenney, Dillard's Clearance Center and movie theater remain.

Fashion Square opened in July 1973, with its general manager estimating opening day crowds at 15,000, according to a 1973 story in the Orlando Sentinel Star. Fashion shows at each end of the mall drew people to the new center, even though less than a quarter of the stores were ready.

“Sightseers and shoppers laden with packages brushed elbows with workmen carrying tools, lamps or giant potted plants,” the article said. “Young trees stood with leaves quivering as men in jumpsuits patted soil more firmly.”

Shoppers were impressed by the center.

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But in 2019, the shopping center has become something sad for those who knew it in its better days.

Haun, out shopping for gifts on her lunch break Tuesday, worked there as a teenager.

“It would be sad to see it go,” she said. “With all the vacant stores in here right now, I just don’t see how they can sustain with the number of people and stay open. As much as I would hate to see it go, I just think more and more stores are going to close because not enough people are coming.”

Donna Messer was at the mall Tuesday with her 2-year-old granddaughter to get pictures with Santa.

“The stores have changed in the mall a lot, a lot of the eating places have went away, but I still come here,” the 66-year-old Orlando resident said. “We walk around and there are not very many stores left, but we still walk around and go in and enjoy ourselves.”

She thinks the mall could use improvement but added it would be sad to see it torn down.

“If they could just open up more stores, it would draw more attention, I think,” she said. “I just wish more people would come, and then we would still have our mall here.”

afuller@orlandosentinel

.com or 407-420-5664; Twitter @afullerreporter