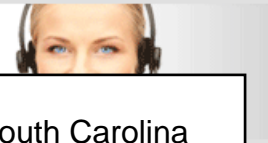


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Inlet Square Mall shopping for more stores

By Dawn Bryant - dbryant@thesunnews.com

MURRELLS INLET -- Finish a major renovation. Check.

Open a movie theater-bowling alley-game complex. Check.

Now, Inlet Square Mall is on the third item on its to-do list: Lure more stores.



cslate@thesunnews.com - Inlet Square Mall has been renovated on the inside and is ready for new tenets to join the existing stores and the new theater and entertainment complex that opened earlier this summer. 090711 Photo By Charles Slate

The south end mall, which is aiming for a comeback after emerging from bankruptcy and finishing a stalled renovation, is stepping up efforts to fill vacant stores, which officials say should bring the much-needed shoppers.

Avison Young, a firm that specializes in commercial real estate, came on board last week charged with recruiting retailers. Avison Young manages and handles leasing, among other services, for shopping centers and office buildings across the country and in Canada, with 25 offices in the two countries, according to its website.

"We need to get our stores filled," said Suzanne Oden, the mall's general manager. "And that's what our focus will be."

Stores operating in the mall desperately want more company. On the top of their wish lists: A shoe store, women's and men's clothing shops, sports shops including Lid's and retailers such as Aeropostale that cater to teens and the younger 20s crowd – a segment many say is the key to the mall's turnaround. Teens who now wander through the mall after catching a flick, bowling or playing games at the new entertainment complex aren't finding much for them, store managers said.

"We need to provide some stores where they can count on to buy some things," Oden said.

Theater sparking retail interest

Walk through Inlet Square Mall and you'll notice just about as many empty stores as operating ones.

About half the available store space is full – 58 percent, "which we are not proud of," Oden said. Among the mall's stores: Belk, Kmart, Stein Mart and

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J.C. Penney Co. All the vacant spots might give shoppers the wrong impression, said John Scott, who moved his Desserts Inc. into the mall in April.

"They think [the mall is] on the way down. They don't realize that it's basically on its way up," he said. "They need to lease the rest of the stores."

Inlet Square Mall has battled back from a bankruptcy in 2009, finished the renovation in 2010 that sat stalled for more than a year and in July, opened what

many said would be a key to the mall's success: a movie theater and game complex.

Frank Theatres opened an 11-screen, 16-lane bowling alley with a Starlight Café, an entertainment hub that some said has led to more traffic in the mall.

"The theater definitely brought business in," said Gregg Smith, owner of Chef Smitty's, which is the only eatery in the food court and just a few steps from the theater. "We always knew it would be the first step...We just need more people in here."

Scott also has noticed a bump in business since the theater's debut. The mall had a theater previously, but it – like other stores – pulled out in January 2010 as the hangover from the bankruptcy -- especially the stalled renovation that left holes in the ceiling and construction cones throughout the mall -- lingered.

"If that theater hadn't opened, this mall wouldn't have had a shot," Scott said.

Mall officials were banking on the theater-game complex to give the shopping center a hook, something that not only lures more shoppers but also catches the eye of retailers who might move in, aiming to feed off the theater's energy. Interest from retailers has picked up since the theater opened, Oden said, though she declined to say who is interested until a deal is signed.

"The phones are beginning to really ring again," she said.

The new theater and the mall's renovation will be key components that Avison Young plans to use to lure new stores, said Tonya Creekmore, who handles asset management, leasing and business development for retail for Avison Young. The firm, which has experience repositioning malls that have gone through bankruptcy, plans to analyze the market and the mall to develop a detailed recruiting strategy, she said.

"We are really looking forward to being able to capitalize on the entertainment complex and renovation," Creekmore said.

Traffic at the theater has met expectations, with the movie-goers and bowlers feeding the mall, said Kali Karellas, the theater's sales and promotions director. With the summer over, the theater is rolling out more theme nights, including happy hour Monday through Thursday, discount days for seniors and other groups and bowling leagues, which plan to kick off later this month, she said.

"Business has been great," Karellas said. "We are trying to get the word out that we are here and going strong."

But the theater traffic hasn't meant better sales for Pawleys Island Swimwear, which opened in March.

"It was very slow before, and it's very slow now. It made no difference to our business," said Eileen Dozier, a sales clerk in the store who had an O magazine, puzzles and books nearby to keep her busy through the day. "[The mall] should be going up, but it's not. It appears to be pretty status quo. There's nobody here. The mall is empty."

Sales ticking up

The lagging economy likely hasn't helped the mall, experts say.

Malls across the country lost stores during the economic downturn. But with few new shopping centers coming on board recently, stores that are looking to expand are eyeing spots in existing malls, said Jesse Tron, a spokesman for the International Council of Shopping Centers.

"Vacancies obviously rose quite significantly when the bottom dropped out of the economy," he said.

Malls such as Inlet Square that have weathered a bankruptcy might still be attractive to retailers if they have the right combination: Prime location, demographics and a solid track record of the firm managing the mall, Tron said.

"Once they get one big-name retailer in there, it probably will have a domino effect," he said.

There also are some positive signs for retail, with sales ticking up, Tron said. Retail sales were up 0.5 percent in July.

"It's really sort of a measured pick up. It's not a precipitous rise," he said. "Everybody figured it would be slow, steady growth."

More events, more shoppers?

Store owners in Inlet Square are ready for the positive growth to trickle down and have ideas to try to help it along.

Several store owners said more special events also would lure more people, adding that the events that the mall has had have brought in crowds. Doesn't matter what kind of special event – car show, senior line dancing, high

school bands and choruses – anything that would attract potential shoppers, they said. The renovation gave the mall a new center court area, and Scott – whose shop is right by the area – wants more activity there. A recent event there for seniors kept the area bustling, he said.

“It was packed, packed the whole time,” Scott said.

Roger Kunch, who has operated Collect This & Raceway in the mall for 10 years, is sprucing up his 4,500-square-foot store readying for a rebound. He remembers the days when he moved into the mall, when business was good, many more stores were open and locals kept the mall’s walkways busy.

“Now that the mall is all finished, the movie theater is in, I’m hoping for an increase in business,” Kunch said. “I want my store to look good.”

Kunch hung in there through the mall’s troubles, never considering moving somewhere else. He’s ready for the good ole days to return.

“I always have had faith in this location, this mall,” he said. “I don’t plan on going anywhere.”

The mall has what it takes to be successful: Good location, especially to catch south enders who don’t want to drive all the way to Myrtle Beach, and a good mix of anchor stores, he said.

“I guess I just figured eventually it would get better,” Kunch said. “Everybody has always liked this mall.”

Several shoppers last week said they remain loyal to Inlet Square, though the number of empty spaces is glaring.

“I just wish they could fill the stores,” said Connie Gambrell-Allen, who had just finished shopping in Kmart and was headed to the food court. “It’s sad. They need to fill the gaps because it looks like they aren’t doing good because all of the empty spots.”

Nancy Newman of Greenville was checking out the mall for the first time, and said she’ll probably be back next time she visits the beach to browse and maybe catch a movie. She blames the economy for all the empty stores.

“It’s nice,” she said. “I wish they had more stores.”


Officials couldn’t pinpoint how long it would take to bring in more shops. A couple of anchor tenants, Belk and J.C. Penney, recently renewed their leases, which shows other retailers that there is some long-term stability in the mall, Creekmore said.

“We feel very secure with our anchor tenants,” she said.

It will take some time to fill the vacant stores, Oden said. She’s aiming to lure a mix of shops, including a shoe store, more ladies clothing shops and teen-targeted retailers.

“We want to have a real nice variety,” she said. “Of course it is not going to happen overnight. We still have a ways to go, but we are hopeful.”

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