

## What you'll see after University Mall's \$10 million makeover in April

By Debbie Carson, Staff Writer

TAMPA -- University Mall's \$10 million expansion will bring Wi-Fi Internet services, an updated dining area, a new kids' play area and restrooms tripled in size. It's all part of the new owner's plan to keep its largest three anchors – Macy's, Dillard's and Sears – and all smaller tenants happy, as well as strengthen shopper loyalty as the first of three huge regional malls has opened in Wesley Chapel, 20 miles north. University Mall lost JC Penney to Wiregrass Ranch center there more than a year ago.

Work is to begin in April and wrap up in October, with a large amount done at night after shopping hours.

The mall's owner, Somera Capital Management LLC, will invest \$10 million worth of improvements into the aging 1.2 million-square-foot mall. The West Coast company is known for its optimistic view of older malls that the firm has been able to update.

"It'll take a while," said Tom Locke, the mall's general manager.

He said the interior work will be done at night, while the mall is closed. Renovations to the exterior of the mall, however, will be done during the day.

The first changes shoppers can expect to see will be the removal of the mall's décor – the hanging decorative pieces and the like.

Workers will replace old light fixtures with new, replacing bulbs with more energy-efficient lighting.

Technology buffs who are tuckered out from shopping will get a place to sit back and relax, surfing the information superhighway from a new Wi-Fi lounge on the second floor.

Locke said that the mall's plans include a large Wi-Fi bar where patrons can set up their laptops, plug them into a power source and get online.

The lounge will also include a seating area with a couple large-screen televisions.

The center court is also targeted for an overhaul. It will be carpeted and also be a Wi-Fi hot spot with plush seating.

And the first floor bathroom? That will nearly triple in size, according to Locke.

The current bathroom is a little more than 800 square feet – about the size of a modest apartment.

The new one will be 2,800 square feet.

"That's larger than some houses," Locke said.

The new bathroom will have a large nursing area with multiple nursing rooms for mother and baby. The rooms will be outfitted with rocking chairs, bottle warmers and changing stations.

The bathrooms will also have a play area for young children to keep themselves occupied while parents tend to their infants.

The food court, too, will be brand new once the renovations are complete. The restaurants there, though, will remain the same, Locke said.

New to the mall will be a 1,500-square-foot play area for children.

"Kids will love it," Locke said of the pirate-themed area – complete with dueling pirate ships.

And, to accommodate the new play area, the mall will have a second, smaller bathroom near the play zone so parents don't have to walk their kids halfway through the mall to the big bathroom.

University Mall is a large survivor in Tampa Bay. It was been challenged years ago by Australian-owned Brandon Town Center and Citrus Park Town Center. Later came International Plaza.

Now in 2008-09, University Mall faces upstarts the Grove, The Shoppes at Wiregrass and Cypress Creek Town Center, all three astride I-75 or Bruce B. Downs and surrounded by higher income family communities that have blossomed mostly in the past five years.

A fourth Pasco mall, Pasco Town Center, touts 4 million square feet of retail, offices, distribution and homes. It has been slowed by the economy and road permitting snags. It's one interstate exit further north at San Antonio and has been estimated to open in the year 2011 and later.

University Mall draws on the USF community, and upper middle class income shoppers from Temple Terrace, North Tampa and Carrollwood. Hundreds of University Village residents can walk from their retirement community to shop next door.

Locke mentioned plans that the mall's new owner, Somera Capital Management, is working on but won't get started anytime soon.

He said the company is excited about making more improvements to the property and has talked about new buildings and uses on the site.

Past plans have explored the possibilities of having a hotel, a restaurant, and a large outparcel building that would host other stores and small restaurants.

Those plans are considered a phase two for the mall and won't get started until after the mall's renovations are completed.

University Mall is located on the north side of Fowler Avenue, west of USF.

Its stores include Dillard's, Burlington Coat Factory, Macy's Regal Cinema, Sears, and Steve & Barry's University Sportswear, which moved into the former JC Penney store.

Somera Capital Management manages the Hilton Garden Inn in the North Tampa area, located at 13305 Tampa Oaks Blvd., according to the company's Web site.

University mall was built in 1974 and renovated two years later.