

Manager Says Big Changes In Store For University Mall

By LENORA LAKE llake@tampatrib.com

Published: Jan 28, 2006

UNIVERSITY AREA - A hotel, three restaurants, a children's play area and retailers new to the Tampa Bay area could be part of the changing face of University Mall.

Mall General Manager Tom Locke told the University Area Enterprise Zone Development Agency this week that the first phase of updating the 32-year-old mall begins in spring.

Locke said that despite rumors it will be sold - or has been sold - to the University of South Florida, there is a long-term vision and plan for the mall.

It begins in March, he said, when low-cost team apparel store Steve & Barry's, which opened in early December, will close for about two months. The interior of the store, the former JCPenney, will be gutted and renovated, Locke said.

The center court (outside Macy's) will become a play area for children. Design details are being confirmed to ensure lines of sight are clear for parents to watch their children, benches will accommodate baby seats and that hand sanitizer dispensers are prevalent.

"We will still be able to have events, but the play area will be the centerpiece," Locke said at the volunteer agency's meeting Tuesday at University Baptist Church.

Locke said the mall is negotiating with several new tenants, which cannot be announced yet. Some would be first-time stores in the Tampa Bay area.

"There are businesses that only exist in L.A. that want to be in this mall," Locke said.

He said the mall plans not to renew leases of tenants that "are underperforming." Also, several tenants are seeking entire sections of the mall. Those sections are occupied by two or three smaller stores.

"The stores that are boarded-up - we call them barricaded - have tenants lined up for them," Locke said.

Another major change is ending the use of the floor above Steve & Barry's as retail space, said Locke, who added that it could become offices.

Closing it to retail would change the ratio of parking spaces to retail space. That would make it possible for a long-range plan to create more free-standing buildings in the mall parking lot, with restaurants and possibly a hotel. Plans call for the demolition of the Firestone tire store at the southwest end of the mall and building another one toward the back side of the mall, he said.

"The restaurants we are looking at are names you know, but they are not in this area," Locke said.

Marilyn Hett, a manager with the Hillsborough County Economic Development Department, suggested that the mall consider the floor above Steve & Barry's for meeting space for conventions.

Hett said USF and the county try to attract professional associations for conferences but there is limited space in area hotels for meetings, exhibits and vendors.

Don Grantham, University Baptist Church pastor, commended Locke for the plans, saying the future of the mall has a direct impact on redevelopment of the neighboring University Area.

"I'm excited about the announcements. The mall is going to impact us for decades to come," Grantham said.

"You give me an incredible amount of confidence that the mall is here to stay."

UNIVERSITY MALL FACTS

LOCATION: 2200 E. Fowler Ave.

YEAR BUILT: 1974

OWNER: Glimcher Realty Trust, Columbus, Ohio

REAL ESTATE: 95 acres

FLOOR SPACE: 1.3 million square feet of leasable space

SHOPPERS (2005):

8.1 million

SALES TAX COLLECTED (2005): \$17 million

COUNTY PROPERTY TAXES PAID (2005):

\$4 million