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Name:

Wesmark revitalization

Headline:

New life for city's oldest regional shopping center

Writer:

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Body:

When Wesmark Plaza opened in the spring of 1966, it was hailed as Sumter's first regional shopping center. Locals remember Wesmark as the premier shopping center in town, but through the years, the center lost its luster as merchants vacated and growth shifted to other areas of town.

Now, Wesmark Plaza has a new lease on life. After extensive renovations, the owners of Wesmark Plaza have been able to lure new retailers like Rugged Wearhouse, Hibbett Sports and Burke's Outlet to the plaza, once again making it one of Sumter's top shopping destinations.

Jim Libby, of Libby Wesmark Enterprises LLC, which owns the 216,000-square-foot facility located on Broad Street at the intersection of Wesmark Boulevard, is glad to see progress.

"It's still a work in progress," Libby said. "We're not satisfied yet. We still have work we want to do out there. We started with a pretty clean plate. There was a lot that had to be done."

Libby Wesmark Enterprises, based in Pittsburgh, purchased the aging center less than three years ago and has guided the plaza's transformation, investing a "substantial amount of money" to update the center's exterior and repair and replace its aging infrastructure.

"Our goal was to upgrade the center and upgrade tenancy," said Barry Nicholson, spokesman for Libby Wesmark Enterprises. "We have a different way of approaching it. We believe you have to put money into something to get something out of it. We were willing to come in and risk the capital to make that happen."

The results of Libby's efforts have been the addition of several new retailers. Big Lots and Plej's relocated to Wesmark Plaza from other Sumter shopping centers and new retailers began filling spaces left vacant by businesses that chose to close or relocate rather than to sign long-term leases.

Now, Sumter residents are eagerly awaiting Wesmark's newest draw, Chuck E. Cheese's, a pizza parlor specializing in family entertainment, which is set to open by the end of the summer. In addition, Libby said a traditional Japanese steakhouse will open in the plaza by the end of the year.

That's good news for merchants like Martha Fisher, general manager of the Beacon Theatre, and Scott Alfred, owner of Brewer's bar and grill.

"As long as they keep the crowds in Wesmark, I'm happy," Fisher said. "It's been five years since we opened our doors here and I'm real proud of Wesmark Plaza. It's come a long way in five years. It has become a showplace."

Fisher said she remembers when Wesmark Plaza opened to crowds of shoppers.

"It just died out," she said. "I've seen it go from being dead to what it is now. It's a good feeling to see business being brought back to Wesmark."

Alfred agrees. He purchased Brewer's two years ago and said he thinks Wesmark has been through revitalization during that time.

"Brewer's, as far as I know, was one of the first renovation projects in here," he said. "The previous shopping center owner gave the owner (of Brewer's) incentives to go in and fix the place up. Anybody who's been here for the last five years can see the shopping center has definitely improved."

Libby said he saw potential in Wesmark Plaza because of its location.

"We like towns like Sumter [-] middle market towns," he said. "Sumter is about 40 miles from Columbia, it's an underserved market. We basically felt it had a lot of potential."

Still, Libby has been careful to market space in Wesmark Plaza to retailers that are a good fit with the city's demographics.

"Sumter is not the kind of market for a Saks Fifth Avenue or a Banana Republic," he said. "We have to cater to the demographic base. We were looking for retailers that had no presence in the market; value-type retailers that specialize in quality merchandise at discount prices. We still have some retailers we'd like to bring in, but we're running out of room."

The revitalization process wasn't a "total uphill battle," Libby said. The plaza already had two strong anchors, Staples, which opened in 1995 and Goody's Family Clothing, which followed two years later. In addition, Wesmark Plaza is home to Beacon Theatre, another reason Libby said the plaza has seen such growth in recent years.

Ray Reich, who heads the city's new Growth and Development Board, said it's good to see companies like Libby Wesmark Enterprises making an investment in Sumter.

"It's a classic example of a shopping center that once was very vibrant but sometimes becomes a blight on a community," Reich said. "Sometimes it takes someone new to come and revitalize it."

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