



## New restaurants, new hope in Vestavia Hills

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By **Michael Tomberlin -- The Birmingham News**



John Abernathy, who oversees leasing and development for property manager Blackwater Resources, says the Vestavia Hills City Center could see its fortunes change with new restaurants like Zoe's and Frio en La Paz and plans to bring in office tenants. (The Birmingham News / Joe Songer)

Vestavia Hills, Alabama -- The Vestavia Hills City Center has had trouble attracting and keeping restaurant and retail tenants at the heart of the property, but officials hope a plan to mix in office and medical space with some vibrant new restaurants could change the center's fortunes.

Excel Vestavia, which owns the center, has hired Birmingham's Graham & Co. to lease part of the center for office users or medical clinic space.

ITAC Solutions is the first new office tenant to join the center. The staffing and recruitment firm just signed to take 7,200 square feet for its offices with plans to move into the space in late November from its renovated warehouse space in downtown Birmingham.

"We have very unique space downtown in a renovated warehouse," said Brian Pitts, co-owner of ITAC. "We like that and wanted to find something similar over the mountain."

Pitts said the company found that in the Vestavia Hills City Center. ITAC is able to build on the large space with personal flourishes like sliding barn doors, a break room with a bar, new furnishings and the glass walls

that line the space.

"We're building some incredibly unique space," he said.

Pitts said he first thought Dan Lovell, the broker from Graham & Co., was crazy for showing him the space. But when he thought about how different it is and the convenience to the restaurants right there and the grocery stores, gas stations and other retailers, it all made more sense.

The company's 32 employees can benefit from those conveniences, he said, and the added space will give ITAC room to add more workers as it grows.

John Abernathy, director of development and leasing for Blackwater Resources, likes the thought of businesses growing in the center after seeing too many businesses -- retailers but especially restaurants -- unable to last there.

"With each new restaurant tenant, it brings activity to the entire center and generates interest in the rest of the space," Abernathy said.

Blackwater Resources manages and handles the retail leasing for owner Excel Vestavia, an entity created by San Diego-based developer Excel Realty Holdings, which bought the property after original owner AIG Baker Shopping Center Properties put it into bankruptcy following an ownership dispute.

Adding the office component along with a number of cosmetic improvements and updating the center are part of a renewed effort to try to fill up the empty space at the center.

Zoe's is set to open its latest restaurant at the center today, joining the recently opened Frio en La Paz and the stalwart Panera Bread at the front of the property. The three restaurants give the center lots of color and splash but, more importantly, eliminate the vacancies.

Abernathy said getting the right mix is the key and Zoe's, Frio, Mugshots Grill & Bar and Panera offer a good foundation. Adding medical clinic space and offices along with showroom space, real estate offices and other versatile uses will help.

An eclectic mix of uses has already proven to be somewhat successful at the center. "The Rick & Bubba Show" has the studios for its syndicated morning show at Vestavia Hills City Center.

Two spaces near the Rave Motion Pictures theater are slated for restaurant space but the rest of the vacancies at the center property could go for offices or retailers.

The Vestavia Hills City Center is actually made up of three centers -- the central property, the strip center anchored by Publix Super Markets and the strip center anchored by Stein Mart.

Taken in total, the occupancy rate of the Vestavia Hills City Center doesn't look so bad at 88 percent. But those numbers are boosted by the 98 percent occupancy at the Publix center and 97 percent occupancy at the Stein Mart center -- where the latest addition, Newk's Express Cafe, is slated to open Nov. 21.

The central property -- which is the result of transforming a former enclosed mall into an open-air center -- is only 75 percent full. Vacancy there at one time approached 40 percent, so the center's fortunes are changing, Abernathy said.

"We're seeing more interest from restaurants and office users," he said. "The city is planning a tree-lighting ceremony here this Christmas. We've got a new more colorful, retro sign we're going to put out front. It's all starting to come together."

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