

Tallahassee Mall: Longtime customers help mall businesses survive

THIS IS THE SECOND OF THREE INSTALLMENTS ABOUT
THE TALLAHASSEE MALL SPANNING THE PAST,
PRESENT AND FUTURE

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One recent Saturday afternoon, the clatter of shoes and shoppers was notably absent at Tallahassee Mall. It was so quiet outside Burlington Coat Factory all that could be heard was an endless electric hum.

Customers popped in and out of Belk and AMC Theater on the opposite end. Others trickled into Ross, Shoe Carnival, Barnes and Nobles and the Guitar Center. But in the parking lots, there was only a smattering of cars.

Tallahassee Mall is a shell of its former self. Listed on a national website outing "dead malls," it's been bogged down by litigation and fleeing stores — including Dillard's in 2006, which dealt the shopping center a crushing blow. It has limped along but has miraculously remained open.

Mid-Monday morning, its empty halls lit up by skylights made it feel more like a museum than a place of bustling commerce. Retired mall walkers outnumbered actual shoppers.

"It's just sad to see stores with not very many people going in and out of them," Norma Basham said. "You wonder how they're staying open."

Fellow walker and longtime friend Phyllis Treadway added, "It was just a great place to shop years ago."



Phyllis Treadway, who comes to the mall for walking exercise, stands in the mostly empty Tallahassee mall on Monday March 2, 2015.

(Photo: Joe Rondone/Democrat)

The 100-acre mall is undergoing a top-down transformation. An Alabama developer is converting the mall into an indoor-outdoor shopping center that's been renamed the CENTRE of Tallahassee. Hopes are high to bring in a new shopping experience.

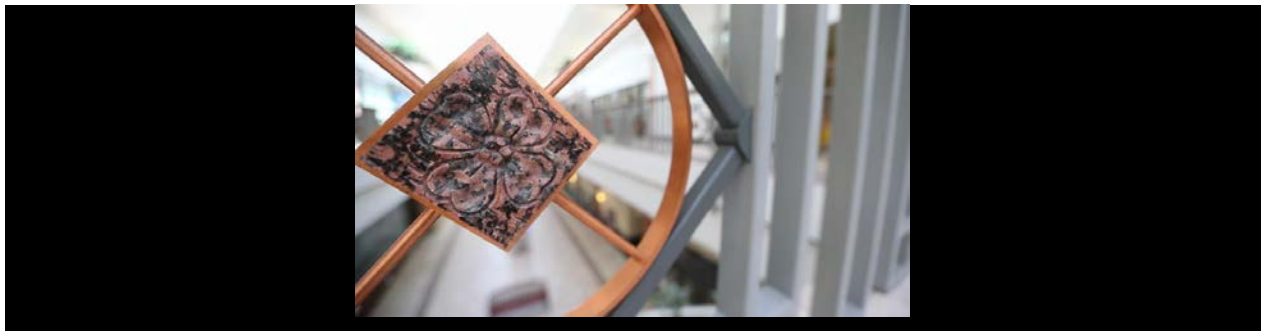
The walking duo, like many longtime residents, recall shopping at Gayfers, Goody's, Parisian and a mix of national and local retailers. Now they mostly shop at Belk and Bath and Body Works at Tallahassee Mall or trek across town to spend their money at Governor Square — the city's most flush indoor mall.

Basham and Treadway meet three times a week for a walk and loop the interior still open to the public. They circled past a plywood barricade steps away from Burlington. They slowed outside C. Line Apparel, the only open nearby store.

They noticed few people in the mall, with the exception of movie goers and faithful mall walkers. One friendly gray-haired man pushing a rolling walker strolled by. He waved. They waved back. Basham and Treadway want to see vibrancy return at the mall they once favored.

"We need something on this side of town," Basham said. "You almost have to pack a lunch to go on the other side of town."

Roughly two dozen stores remain at Tallahassee Mall, which sits minutes from I-10. Renovations are being made to the section of the mall open to the public.



Tallahassee residents have seen stores leave the Tallahassee Mall over past decade

Most notably, an additional 155,000 square feet is being gutted for phase 1 of construction to create a pedestrian-centered, open-air shopping town square with streets evoking a warehouse décor and reminiscent of shopping in St. John's Town Center in Jacksonville.

"We think there's still very much a place for an enclosed mall, but it has to be the right enclosed mall and the right approach," said Alex Baker, the mall's developer and owner of Blackwater Resources LLC based in Birmingham, Alabama.

"We are trying to figure out what's here and making the most of it," Baker added. "No sense in tearing something down just because you can tear something down."

When Blackwater acquired the mall, many tenants were not paying rent, and those who were paying rent were on licensing leases, which required tenants to pay a portion of their profits month-to-month.

Baker and his team requested a business plan from tenants. The team discovered tenants, such as folk artist Mary Proctor, who were surviving but in many ways had been forgotten. Baker said Proctor is a community treasure with national acclaim. She planned on leaving.

He asked her to stay. Her gallery has been relocated to the upper deck above the AMC theater.

At one kiosk, fine watches from Bulova, Anne Klein, Slagen Denmark and Citizen pack a display case. Mike Melon handled a luminescent 32-diamond crusted watch with a mother-of-pearl face. But Melon, the mall's longest standing tenant, has a welcoming personality that outshines his 150,000 products.

"I've been here for a long time and the main thing for my survival is my loyal customers," said Melon, who depends on word of mouth advertising.

"I'm surviving," he said.



Mike Memon, owner of the Watches Plus kiosk at the Tallahassee Mall since 1997, works behind the booth on Monday March 2, 2015.

(Photo: Joe Rondone/Democrat)

The Pakistani immigrant opened his Watches Plus business in 1997 after previously working for a jewelry store in mall. He used to eat lunch at Morrison's Cafeteria. The daily scene of shoppers toting bags and scurrying from store to store made him think the mall was an ideal place to venture out on his own.

Melon was relocated to his current spot near Victoria Secret's once construction began. Previously, his kiosk was near the former Rack Room Shoes and Spencer Gifts. Melon, leaning against a glass surface, said some tenants fled due to maintenance issues such as leaky roofs. It wasn't uncommon to see buckets catching raindrops.

He's pleased with the new owners and his new spot closer to AMC. Although Baker and his leasing team haven't shared intimate details with tenants, Melon's voice rose with excitement when talking about the mall's rebirth.

"I hope it's going to be much better," Melon said.

Large signs outside indicate the mall is still open. Arrows point to larger tenants like Burlington Coat Factory and Barnes & Noble. Concrete slabs look like mountains of crumbled crackers behind the mall. On site are equally tall dirt piles. The clamor of heavy construction equipment fills the air.

The scene is a promise of progress.

Instead of refuting rumors of closure, tenants can talk with optimism to customers about the coming renaissance.



Ryan James, manager of C.Line at the Tallahassee Mall, stands in front of his store on Monday, March 2, 2015.

(Photo: Joe Rondone/Democrat)

"In the beginning, I was just like them and frustrated because it's a kill zone," said Ryan James, a manager at C Line Apparel, which sells hip-hop influenced clothes. "But, at the same time, once you start seeing your loyal customers come in, it kind of gives you that push like 'OK, people still know you're here.' "

But new customers are harder to attract, James said.

On a recent Saturday, DJ E-Zone, a radio personality for Blazing 102.3, craned his neck looking for shoppers as he stepped outside C Line Apparel in between live broadcasts designed to attract new customers. The urban clothing store has been a five-year tenant.

A few tenants haven't had the same struggles. Sam Goody music store feeds off the nearby traffic streaming in from AMC Theater. When retailers like Borders and Vinyl Fever closed years ago, the store became the city's prime place to purchase new and used movies and vinyl records from Miles Davis' "Kind of Blue" and Pink Floyd's "The Dark Side of The Moon."

Store Manager Brian Burgess said Sam Goody gets between 50 to 75 customers per day and it hasn't seen much of a dip in customers, even with the recession and Dillard's exit. But, the mall's transformation still means just as much to him as the struggling tenants.

"We're going to be a lot more recognizable in a newly recognizable mall like this," Burgess said.

James and other store owners have weathered the worst. They feel leaving now would be foolish.

"You could walk away while everything is going on now, and then want to run back in when everything is fixed," James said. "It's hard, but at the end of the day it will get easier."

Current and new tenants coming in:

New — *The Brick Yard is an entertainment venue being built near the proposed amphitheater on the back end of the mall.*

Existing — *American Folk Art*

Existing — *Barnes & Noble*

Existing — *Bath & Body Works*

Existing — *Belk*

Existing — *Burlington Coat Factory*

Existing — *C Line Apparel*

Existing — *Cold Stone Creamery*

Existing — *Dollar Tree*

Existing — *Formals by Vince*

Existing — *GNC Live Well*

Existing — *Gamescape*

Existing — *Guitar Center*

Existing — *Modern Communications*

Existing — *JC Jewelers*

Existing — *Paragon Salon Studio*

Existing — *Ross Dress for Less*

Existing — *Shoe Carnival*

Existing — *Sam Goody*

Existing — *Stone Age Jewelry*

Existing — *Tire Kingdom*

Existing — *Watches Plus*

Existing — *Victoria's Secret*

Details on new incoming tenants will be announced in