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New leasing agents have new vision for troubled mall

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By Eric Robinette

Staff Writer

No matter what guise the Forest Fair Village/Cincinnati Mall has tried in recent years, nothing has stuck, leaving the space that straddles Fairfield and Forest Park still mostly vacant.

Now, however, a new leasing team has taken over, and their goal is to try something besides retail, which hasn't worked at the troubled complex so far. Agents at Cincinnati's Prudential Commercial Real Estate, which took over leasing operations about three weeks ago, want to try a mix of business, recreational and office space to revitalize the mall, said David Mussari, the managing broker at Prudential.

"We've known the folks at World Properties, the ownership group, for about three years now. We met them when they first came in and took over the mall," Mussari said. "We did some consulting and gave them some strategies to revitalize the mall. At the time, they weren't quite ready to really move forward in an aggressive way on what we had recommended. They came back to us."

"About three years ago, they were still looking at trying to create a traditional retail model. And that was not our recommendation at the time," he said. "It still isn't. This has to be a more creative solution."

The mall has gone through a variety of names over the years, from Forest Fair Mall to Cincinnati Mills Mall to simply the Cincinnati Mall. Most recently, it was called Forest Fair Village. But no matter the name, one operation after another faltered. World Properties, based in New York, has owned the mall since 2010.

Mussari called the 1.5 million-square-foot facility a "dark" mall, meaning one that is mostly vacant. Its occupancy stands between 25 and 30 percent, he said. Nevertheless, it's been kept up and is still active, with no sections that are shut down.

"Our vision is really to create a work/play environment. There will still be some retail, but we want to create an atmosphere where we have more office space going in there, more recreational-type tenants. There's a lot of large spaces," Mussari said. "There's some (movie) theater space that will probably not be utilized as a theater, because the saturation for first-run theaters is pretty good."

"We have some creative ideas as far as putting an educational facility in there. We're talking to some folks about that. So it's really to create this diverse mix of businesses inside of this beautiful structure and really utilize the space," Mussari said. "Only three or four weeks into this, we've got dozens of conversations going."

One of those "conversations" includes discussions with a business about establishing a regional headquarters to make use of the large spaces available, he added.

The mall already has some business in place that would fit into the new model, including the Bee Active Adventure Zone and the Bee Fit Health Club. The latter is a 24-hour fitness center, while Bee Active is a recreational facility that offers playtime facilities and parties for families, said Angie Demers, the owner/operator. They've been in the mall for a year already and are looking to add gymnastics and cheerleading to their offerings.

While business there has been "okay," Demers said, "It sure would help to have more people in the mall."

With Bee Active and Bee Fit already situated, "That is one of the reasons my companies seemed to make a good fit" in the new vision for the mall, she said.

Tim Bachman, the director of development for the city of Fairfield, said the new leasing agents are wise to think outside the box. The mall recently suffered a setback when Bass Pro Shops announced plans to close its anchor store there to move to West Chester Twp.

"I know retail has not worked on that site for 25 years," he said. "Other uses with regard to recreation, office — I wish the best for the project. I just don't know what the market's going to accept or not going to accept ... I think it needs a significant re-purpose, a recreation/medical/artist type thing. I don't know, but I do know retail doesn't work," he said.

Mussari said retail saturated the local market, and that corridor around Interstate 275 simply can't support it, especially with the recent boom including Cincinnati Premium Outlets in Monroe, and the Liberty Center mega-retail complex, now under construction in Liberty Twp.

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- Posted by UncleAndy2 at 7:14 a.m. Apr. 16, 2014
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We have a whole mall empty, along with many eyesore, abandoned, aging strip malls. Yet, the enemies of green space keep developing more and more sprawl strip malls and retail elsewhere. It is a shame. The greedy speculators won't stop until every blade of grass has been cemented over with something that evolves from first rate retail, to a thrift shoppe, to an empty storefront.



- Posted by justabitcrazy at 8:22 a.m. Apr. 16, 2014
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Shouldn't they have been thinking outside the box a few years ago....I have been saying this for several years to utilize it as a mixed use property. Personally, it needs to be developed into office/minimal retail with some condos or apartments included, but that's thinking outside the box too.



- Posted by benoni at 8:50 a.m. Apr. 16, 2014
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UncleAndy2, put your money where your mouth is. Might work.

crazy is right, crazy.



- Posted by ChrisOw at 9:05 a.m. Apr. 16, 2014
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The mall is cursed. It was built on a indian burial ground.

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