

BEYOND THE MALL - Deerfield Towne Center is Anderson's Latest Challenge to the Mall

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With the official opening of Deerfield Towne Center in Mason last week and two other major projects looming, Jeffrey Anderson Real Estate is determined to make Greater Cincinnati thoroughly acquainted with the next generation of retail shopping.

Anderson is the main mover here behind the "lifestyle center" concept -- an upscale, open-air shopping district that tries to conjure old-fashioned downtown streetscapes punctuated with shops and eateries. In addition to Deerfield Towne Center, Anderson is redeveloping the Crestview Hills Mall in Northern Kentucky into an open-air lifestyle center.

In 2000, the company introduced its upscale Rookwood Commons opposite its established Rookwood Pavilion strip center development in Norwood. The developer is currently also seeking to add a mix of retail, office and residential in Norwood called Rookwood Exchange.

Stores lineup

Some of the retailers at the just-opened Deerfield Towne Center:

- Abuelo's Mexican Food Embassy
- Ann Taylor Loft
- Arhaus Furniture
- Bed, Bath & Beyond
- Borders Books & Music
- Claddagh Irish Pub
- Dick's Sporting Goods
- Gold's Gym
- New York & Co.
- Qdoba
- Polo Grille
- Red Star Tavern
- Skeffington's
- Wild Oats

The influx of retail's hottest new model in the region has forced Greater Cincinnati's premier old-style enclosed mall -- Kenwood Towne Centre -- to steal aspects of the concept. The mall's owner is overhauling the shopping center by adding an outdoor "streetscape" that will feature such choice retailers as the Cheesecake Factory, which opened earlier this year.

Mark Fallon, director of real estate at Jeffrey Anderson, said Cincinnati was especially ripe for lifestyle center development because its mall base had been neglected. "Cincinnati was a mish-mash of malls that weren't being invested in," he said. "There was no acknowledgement that there was a better mousetrap out there, and now they're getting their fingers caught in it."

Observers say it's hard to predict the winners and losers.

Kenwood, as well as Tri-County Mall and Eastgate Mall could feel the pull of shoppers migrating to the new Deerfield destination, said Chris Ohlinger, a retail consultant who runs Service Industry Research Systems in Highland Heights, Ky. He also said Florence Mall could be affected by a reinvigorated Crestview.

Ohlinger said the new open-air plazas have a strong appeal, although it's still too early to gauge the full impact on Cincinnati's established shopping centers. He said the scaled-down size and the dressed-up walkways offered a solid combination of easy access and pleasing aesthetics.

"Lifestyle centers are escape centers for shoppers -- the antidote for the plastic mega-mall and for customers who can't remember where they parked," he said.

Shoppers turned out in force last week as Deerfield opened wide.

Janice Banks, a 63-year-old homemaker from Mason, said she was thrilled to have a new Wild Oats store move into town, sparing her the 15-mile drive to Norwood. Indeed, she said the proximity of the center would also save her the trouble of driving the seven miles down I-71 to Kenwood Towne Centre or the nine miles to Tri-County Mall, though she predicted she would still make the commute to visit Lazarus-Macy's and J.C. Penney at the malls.

"I like it so far -- there's quicker, easier access," she said, referring to the parking available in front of each store.

Still, Banks confessed to mixed feelings about the developers' open-air design. "It has a town feel -- that's nice. It's a lost thing today, which is a shame," she said. "But what happens when it rains?"

Gina Stewart, a 40-year-old instructional aid from Deerfield, agreed. "It's real close to home, it's got a nice feel to it, but it looks like it's designed for fair weather," she said.

Stan Eichelbaum, president of Cincinnati-based Marketing Developments Inc., said it's too early to write off malls, adding the impact of Deerfield and similar centers will be subtler. He noted malls still occupy very desirable real estate and draw hordes of shoppers. He also pointed to Kenwood's construction as evidence that mall owners are determined to evolve and thrive.

"The mall is still dominant," he said. "Malls in Cincinnati are very fortified."

Still, Eichelbaum said the proliferation of new retail space will inevitably claim victims, since there are only so many shoppers. "Retail is the most overbuilt economic sector in America," he said. "There's only so much spendable income."

Still, with Jeffrey Anderson and other developers employing lifestyle concepts in new projects, Greater Cincinnati will inevitably see more retail space.

Work is under way to redevelop the Crestview Hills Mall into a similar open-air shopping destination. Except for two restaurant outparcels near the center's entrance, only

Dillard's department store remains open and standing as construction crews build a replacement store and other shops at the opposite end of the parking lot.

Developers say the new Dillard's store is slated to open in March, at which time the existing store will be bulldozed.

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