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WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2011

Rookwood Commons lands 'big fish' with REI

By Laura Baverman
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NORWOOD — Recreational Equipment Inc., one of the nation's most revered outdoor gear retailers, will open its first store in Ohio at Rookwood Commons next fall.

Popularly known as REI, it will be the most significant retailer to join Rookwood Commons since the Norwood shopping complex opened in 2000, said Mark Fallon, vice president of leasing with center developer and manager Jeffrey R. Anderson Real Estate.

News of the store's opening, first reported Tuesday on Cincinnati.com, comes after an 18-month pursuit of the

Seattle-based retailer. Construction starting in January will change the way the Commons looks as REI raises the structure's roof and its distinctive navy blue, corrugated metal facade takes shape.

REI expects to hire a store manager and 50 employees beginning next spring. It says its 122 stores nationwide typically draw shoppers from a 100-mile radius.

"We saw them as the best of the best nationally in sporting goods, and one people travel the farthest to get to," Fallon said. "This was our way of landing the big fish."

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REI

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REI says it will offer the widest selection of camping, paddling and hiking equipment, road and mountain bicycles, running and fitness apparel, travel accessories and snow sports gear in the region.

It also will host weekly "how-to" classes, deploy staff and funds to community service projects and link up its customers with local outfitters and outdoor activities. A service shop will be open to fix bikes, skis and snowboards. A rental shop will lend camping and travel gear.

REI operates as a co-op. When shoppers pay a one-time fee of \$20, they share in the company's annual profit, receiving dividends of about 10 percent of a year's purchases.

After a year-and-a-half courtship by Fallon and Anderson Real Estate broker Emily Bevis, REI agreed to a 10-year lease for a 21,000-square-foot storefront. Construction will join the former Anthropologie and current Coldwater Creek spaces. It will raise part of the roof to add a 4,000-square-foot mezzanine along the back of the building for offices and storage. Coldwater Creek downsizes into the former American Eagle storefront.

The facade of the new store will showcase REI's corrugated metal, wood trellis and black-and-white square sign. Bike

racks will line the store's sidewalk. In accordance with its mission, REI only uses environmentally friendly building materials and factors water management and energy efficiency in its store design.

"Cincinnati is a great recreational market and a beautiful city," said Michelle Yancy, retail director for REI's Midwest region.

"There are lots of good competitors already and lots of community partner opportunities."

Cincinnati is a key expansion market for REI because it already has 5,000 local co-op members and evidence that those shoppers typically buy in Chicago, Detroit and Pittsburgh stores, or online at www.rei.com, Yancy said.

The company also has aggressively entered new states and markets this year.

In November, it opened its first South Carolina store and in December, it opened a Manhattan location in one of Soho's most historic buildings.

Next spring, REI plans to open in a suburb of Indianapolis, its first store in Indiana.

The retailer's growth doesn't come as a huge surprise. According to Leisure Trends Group, a Boulder, Colo., market research agency, national sales of outdoor apparel and gear grew 14 percent in October to \$126 million, from October 2010.

That was the category's largest sales volume for the month of October since the agency began tracking in 1998.