

ATTENTION, SHOPPERS; NEW RETAIL CENTER GOING UP ON SOUTH SIDE MAY KEEP LAKELANDERS IN TOWN

Byline: Elizabeth McCormick The Ledger

LAKELAND

Debbie Pearce is tired of fighting Interstate 4 traffic to shop at stores such as Banana Republic, Nordstrom and Talbots.

'Everyone I know goes to Tampa or Brandon (to shop),' said the South Lakeland resident.

Pearce said she would be happy to see a high-end shopping center developed on Harden Boulevard -- something currently in the works.

Pearce is one of many shoppers and retailers who are looking forward to a new retail complex about a mile away from Merchant's Walk. In fact, both are looking forward to new stores and the increased traffic it would bring to the area.

With more than 500,000 square feet planned, Lakeside Village is being reviewed by planners and developers for a 60-acre site off Harden Boulevard, just north of the Polk Parkway. Developers say it will be similar to Winter Park Village near Orlando.

'Lakeland is growing and any center of that magnitude is a plus,' said Jeff Weiner, owner of Gourmet Country, a specialty food shop in Merchant's Walk that opened in August. 'Merchant's Walk has a variety of stores and people will continue to come here. Your customer base hopefully will stand by you.'

SteinMart manager Laura Rushing agrees.

'Anything they build is exciting,' she said. 'It will bring more traffic to the area. We already get people from Haines City and Auburndale due to the Parkway.'

Christa Deason, public information officer for the Parkway, said the toll road can grow to meet any traffic needs.

'People like new places to shop and it will serve local needs,' she said. 'But we need to make sure we're keeping an open view out there so it doesn't have a negative impact on traffic already there.'

The city of Lakeland is working with the Department of Transportation in Bartow, the Central Florida Regional Planning Council and Polk Parkway officials on traffic issues.

Deason said the Parkway is a good economic opportunity for the whole county. 'This is one of those opportunities,' she said of Lakeside Village.

Although many see it as a good opportunity, Lakeland resident Ron Dixon isn't happy about the new retail complex.

'They should keep the shopping malls on South Florida Avenue,' said Dixon, who lives on South Pipkin Road, not too far from where the complex would be developed.

'Lakeland is too big for our britches already,' he said, adding that he regularly shops at only SteinMart, Ross and Marshalls.

Others said the new shopping center should keep people from going to Brandon or Orlando.

'It's an all-day affair (to go to Brandon or Orlando),' said Pearce, 45, of South Lakeland. 'We're definitely ready for something like this.'

Tony Fridovich, a Lakeland Realtor, agreed.

'It will keep people from leaving town,' he said.

They leave town to shop at places such as Banana Republic, Ann Taylor Loft, Borders Books, New Balance and Jos A. Bank (men's apparel), which are at Winter Park Village, developed by Sarasota-based Casto Southeast, an affiliate of the Don M. Casto Organization. Casto also will develop Lakeside Village.

Leases will be signed by spring of next year and construction may start by June or July.

The developer does have a letter of intent from a cinema chain for a stadium-seating theater to be built at the property. Theaters with stadium seating have ascending rows similar to a sports stadium with large, padded seats. Winter Park Village has a 20-screen Regal Cinema theater.

Merchant's Walk has a 10-screen theater owned by AMC.

Rick King, AMC spokesman, would not comment on the possibility of another theater coming to the area, except to say, 'It would clearly be a competitive situation.'

A Merchant's Walk leasing agent, with New York-based Kimco Realty Corp., did not return repeated phone calls.

Fridovich said he thinks the new shopping center will affect the AMC theater more than anything.

'I don't think the anchors (at Merchant's Walk) are going to leave,' he said. '(Lakeside Village) will be different types of tenants.'

The movie theater in North Lakeland recently announced it would be adding stadium seating and expanding.

Bill Homer, president of StarNet Theaters in Jacksonville and owner of Lakeland Square 10, said he thinks Lakeland can handle two stadium-seating theaters.

'Ours is quite a ways away,' he said. 'There are really two sides to Lakeland, north and south.'

Lakeside Village also calls for a 100-room hotel. It would be behind the already developed Courtyard Marriott and Residence Inn in the Oakbridge area.

Mike Phillips, general manager of the 78-room Courtyard, said he's excited about it.

'It should be beneficial for hotels and the city,' he said, adding that business should be good for his hotel during construction. 'But it will depend on the type of hotel and the market they want to

attract," he said.

However, John Loute, president of the Lakeland Innkeepers Association and general manager of the Amerisuites in Lakeland, doesn't think Lakeland can handle another hotel.

"This market is saturated and another unit would be bad for business -- for existing and new ones," he said.

Loute said it would be five years before it would be time to build another hotel in Lakeland.

"There's not that much business to go around," he said.

South Lakeland continues to expand its choices for retail -- bringing in more high-end shops and restaurants.

Jeff Holden, president of Holden & Kennick Enterprises in Lakeland, plans to start construction on a shopping plaza at Brannen Road and South Florida Avenue. His plans include a restaurant, a kitchen accessory store, home theater showroom and furniture retailer.

It will be between 80,000 and 100,000 square feet when it's completed and construction should start in January.

But he's not worried about Lakeside Village.

"Any retail development is a good thing," he said. "Our project is smaller and we have a South Florida Avenue location. Harden Boulevard is more of a secondary location."