

No downtime: County Line Road retailers hanging tough

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October 17, 2010

When Mike Ezell explains why he has kept Play It Again Sports along County Line Road for 15 years, his main reason lies outside the sporting goods store's windows.

The constant stream of cars passing through the retail corridor that separates Jackson and Ridgeland has helped the business thrive, even with competitors a couple of miles away.

"This is still the focal point of (area) retail," says Ezell, Play It Again's store manager. "County Line Road doesn't have any downtime."

Upgrades designed to give the retail corridor a more unique identity and better traffic flow have been made, while some business owners say they're just committed to remaining in a centralized location within metro Jackson.

In recent years, major retail centers have opened on Highland Colony Parkway in Ridgeland and Lakeland Drive in Flowood. And a new center is scheduled to open in Madison as the important holiday sales season starts.

Those areas also have succeeded in gaining residents who once called Jackson home.

As a result, in the last decade, traffic has increased significantly on Lakeland Drive near Dogwood Festival in Flowood and on Highland Colony Parkway, and Mississippi 463, which is near the Grandview development under construction in Madison.

"The population growth has driven retail growth in big ways," says Benjie Barham, director of business development for the Hinds County Economic Development District. "There's still a lot of retail (on County Line), but it may serve more of a Jackson-Ridgeland market than it used to."

Although an estimated 28,000 vehicles travel the roadway between Ridgewood Road and Northpark mall daily, that figure is down by about 9,000 vehicles from 1998, according to the Mississippi Department of Transportation.

Some large, visible County Line Road properties remain empty, including the former Barnes & Noble and Circuit City buildings.

Circuit City went bankrupt and closed all its stores nationwide, while Barnes & Noble moved to Renaissance at Colony Park off Highland Colony Parkway.

A Best Buy is scheduled to open at Grandview. It's not clear if the store along County Line Road will remain open once that happens. Best Buy officials couldn't be reached for comment.

Ridgeland Mayor Gene McGee says County Line's future viability will be tied to Northpark mall's performance.

The mall opened in the mid-1980s and helped spark retail development along the corridor. But traditional malls like Northpark have struggled against open-air shopping centers and online retail.

"Northpark has been the engine" for County Line Road's growth, McGee said. "It will be the pacesetter."

Northpark general manager Brian Pearson said three new stores will open in the coming months, and several more have opened in the last year.

He wouldn't say what the mall's current occupancy rate is, and Northpark doesn't release its total sales figures.

The mall's website lists about 120 tenants, but



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vacant storefronts dot Northpark's interior.

An improved economy should mean more opportunities to fill remaining empty space, Pearson said.

"I think we've turned the corner on that. There are a lot of factors involved in a business decision, but certainly the economy is a major factor."

County Line has success stories to promote, such as Play It Again Sports moving last weekend from its longtime home on Ridgewood Court Road to a larger space in North Regency Square.

Burgers & Blues has established itself as a popular restaurant and is already expanding after less than a year at Centre Park Shopping Center.

"We've been blessed beyond anything we thought was possible," said Steven Sahler, who co-owns the eatery with Al Stamps.

Jonathan Gould, CEO of New York City-based Stonemar Properties, owns Centre Park, Purple Creek and North Regency Square shopping centers along County Line Road. Play it Again Sports and Burgers and Blues are in his centers.

Gould said the presence of Northpark and national retailers such as Sam's Club, Best Buy and Lowe's will help County Line Road remain viable, even as new competition emerges.

"The properties have been around for a while. They're well-established," he said. "You have this place where you have so many retailers, department stores."

But history has shown the Jackson metro area has struggled to maintain more than one major retail center.

Northpark's opening stole away key stores that lead to the downturn of Metrocenter, which had done the same thing to the former Jackson Mall.

Gould said real estate along County Line Road is often cheaper than newer developments, prompting many of his clients to renew their leases or sign new agreements in the past several years.

Ezell said he looked at moving Play It Again Sports farther north in Ridgeland or to Flowood but found the rent and traffic on County Line was too good to

set aside.

Sahler says his restaurant is saving an estimated \$50,000 to \$75,000 per year by locating along County Line as opposed to in a newer retail area. The restaurant already has doubled its size to 5,668 square feet.

Meanwhile, the Circuit City building could have a new owner by the end of the month. The 32,975-square-foot property will be sold to the highest bidder at an onsite auction on Oct. 28.

The property is already fetching a lot of interest from potential suitors, says Stephen Kaler, regional vice president of its auctioning group, National Commercial Auctioneers.

He believes the property will have a buyer that day.

"The auction process brings a finality. There's a lot of money on the sidelines ... from people willing to invest," he said.

County Line has been criticized for traffic problems, but Ridgeland city officials reasoned a better experience traveling through the city would mean more people stopping there to shop.

"We kept getting reports that it took 15 minutes to get from the mall to the interstate," says Alan Hart, Ridgeland's community development director.

In the last few years, the city has taken steps to improve traffic flow.

This year, the city created a "Northpark Overlay

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District," stretching from U.S. 51 to just past Pear Orchard Road, that sets uniform design and signage standards and forbids certain types of businesses, such as pawn shops and check-cashing stores.

McGee hopes widening Lake Harbor Drive from Old Canton Road to U.S. 51 and extending it from U.S. 51 to Highland Colony Parkway will help alleviate traffic on County Line Road.

The city hopes to have each part of the project bid by early next year.

To comment on this story, call Jeff Ayres at (601) 961-7050.



Play It Again Sports manager Mike Ezell says the store's new location in the old Be-Bop Record Shop on County Line Road in Ridgeland features plenty of floor and wall space. He said traffic volume helped him decide to locate there. (Greg Jenson/The Clarion-Ledger)



Circuit City now sits vacant along with several other properties in the County Line Road area. (Brian Albert Broom/The Clarion-Ledger)

Major outlets

Major businesses and retailers along County Line Road:

- Northpark mall
- Target
- Walmart
- Best Buy
- Sam's Club
- Lowe's

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