

Northland Mall's possible future: Pricey condos

[Bill Laitner](#), Detroit Free Press Published 10:57 p.m. ET March 22, 2017 |

Imagine driving into what used to be a Macy's, rolling up a couple of floors to park, then walking to your classy condo. It could happen. . .soon.



(Photo: CallisonRTKL)

You'd drive up to an old Macy's department store, pull right inside and drive up two, three, even four floors to an indoor parking spot — just down the hall from your luxury loft condo.

No worries: Shopping is just a stroll away or elevator ride away.

Leading to stores and dining would be quiet hallways, some boasting the collectible mid-century-modern art that once adorned Northland Center — the largest shopping center in the nation when it opened in 1954. Now, Northland's former anchor store, known to generations of Detroiters as J.L.

Hudson's, could soon reinvent itself as luxury lofts that look out on landscaped parks, restaurants, stores and acres of new offices.

That's the vision Southfield Mayor Ken Siver will share Thursday, when he's scheduled to give his State of the City speech at City Hall. And residents will listen, while city planners and mayors across the country eye the ambitious plans for one of the nation's most storied shopping centers that has become the poster child for a nationwide trend summed up in the name of a couple of hobby-historians' website — deadmalls.com — based in Glens Falls, N.Y.

This vision of Southfield's civic leaders to make Northland a mixed-use development includes plenty of housing options and far fewer stores. It's to be the centerpiece of a transformation that retail experts say should happen at countless other malls and oversized shopping centers across Michigan and the nation, as American shopping habits change in a digital age, and Amazon.com and other online merchants push traditional retailers to downsize or, worse, go out of business.

"It's a trend no one can stop," said Siver, 70, who said he has visited Northland ever since his youth. Doomsayers claim that the biggest anchor stores must be leveled, he said. But with Macy's closing Sunday at Eastland in Harper Woods, and at Westland (in that rare city named after its big mall), word is getting around about Southfield's key discovery, Siver said.

"The Macy's building is rock-solid. It would cost well over \$1 million to demolish it, and our studies show that it's strong enough to handle auto traffic inside," he said.

The potential for indoor parking makes the cavernous, now-empty Macy's at Eastland eminently appealing to Harper Woods Mayor Ken Poynter.

"Visualize this: The second and third floors become condos and the fourth floor has multiple restaurants up there, maybe even dining on the roof — you could see Lake St. Clair," Poynter said.

"That area facing 8 Mile, you could cut windows into that wall and put terraces outside," he said. Something needs to happen soon, though, because already "the domino effect is setting in" — smaller stores are closing in response to Macy's departure, Poynter said.

When anchor stores close, it's often the death knell for a mall, said retail consultant Ken Dalto in Bingham Farms. Unfortunately, the online retailers grabbing market share from traditional brick-and-mortar stores don't need the kind of space offered by empty shopping centers, Dalto said.

"They need warehouses and distribution centers but they don't need these big spaces with all the parking," Dalto said.

"The cities being left with these empty malls are saying, what can we do? They're looking at a combination of housing, restaurants, retail and office space, as well as parking — that's essential. And if you put those components together, it's really like creating a new downtown," Dalto said.

Across the country, 63 Macy's stores were scheduled to close this spring, the chain announced in January. In addition, such major retailers as Sears/Kmart, Dick's Sporting Goods and J.C. Penney are closing their stores apace.

In Westland, Mayor William Wild and the city's economic-development staff has a meeting planned Monday with the mall's owners to discuss the future of the empty Macy's store, said Thelma Kubitskey, the city's chief business development officer.



One of the entrances to Northland Mall in Southfield in February 2015. (Photo: Regina H. Boone, Detroit Free Press)

Westland is hoping that commercial leasing will fill the void where shoppers once bought everything from blazers to bedding.

"I know the mayor is very interested in what Ford did at Fairlane" in Dearborn, Kubitskey said.

Ford recently moved about 1,800 office staff members into the space of Fairlane Town Center's former Lord & Taylor store, which had been closed for a decade. That's an ideal reuse of commercial

space at the nation's aging shopping centers, said CC Consulting's principal Cindy Ciura in Bloomfield Hills.

"They made not only a significant investment, but look at those employees. They say, 'Ohmigosh, I get to work in a mall. I can go out to eat and I can shop on my lunch hour.'

"Hopefully, similar situations could occur at Eastland and Westland," Ciura said.

Not every mall is failing. Notable exceptions include Great Lakes Crossing in Auburn Hills, considered one of the nation's most successful outlet malls; and the Somerset Collection in Troy, well-positioned near Bloomfield Hills and other affluent communities to keep its status as a prestigious shopping experience, Ciura said.

One big mall that's been largely dead for 15 years but that soon could be sold and transformed, is decrepit Summit Place in Waterford Township.

After years of battling blight and minor crime at the site on Telegraph Road just west of Pontiac, then ordering the owner to demolish much of the site, the township board recently gave the buyer and seller until April 11 to sign a deal, said Waterford Township Clerk Sue Camilleri.

"There is a signed purchase agreement, but they wanted extra time for due diligence — it's a huge undertaking," Camilleri said,.

So, will someone reinvent Summit Place as a new mall? Not a chance, said Deputy Oakland County Executive Matt Gibb, who heads the county's economic development efforts. A non-disclosure agreement prevented Gibb from revealing what the buyer plans, but "it certainly won't be a mall because clearly that would fail."

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