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Aging Northland to get face-lift

Firm hailed for rejuvenating malls buys 'dead' center

Jennifer Youssef / The Detroit News

Northland Center, once the world's largest shopping center and Metro Detroit's oldest, has a new owner -- a New York firm with plans to recapture the mall's retail glory.

Ashkenazy Acquisition Corp. purchased the 1.7 million--square-foot mall Friday for an undisclosed sum from Jager Management Inc., of Jenkintown, Pa. The Pennsylvania firm bought Northland in 2000.

Ashkenazy Acquisition, which also owns Eastland Center in Harper Woods, plans to add stores and make other improvements to the Southfield mall, which opened in 1954 and was hailed as the future of shopping in post-war America.

In recent years, foot traffic at the aging mall on Northwestern Highway at Eight Mile has declined and major retailers have left, including JC Penney and Kohl's. Analysts said the mall doesn't have the right mix of retailers, mid-priced anchors and food outlets to make it a shopping destination. The mall's occupancy rate is about 70 percent.

"It's a shell of its former self. There's not a good mix of stores," said Ken Dalto, a Farmington Hills retail analyst, adding that security also is a concern for many shoppers. Without the right offerings, "a mall ceases to be an event."

Dalto said the purchase by Ashkenazy, which has a reputation for revitalizing older shopping centers such as Union Station in Washington, D.C., and the Shops at Grand Avenue in Milwaukee, is a much-needed boost to the mall.

"I think it's positive, because Northland is a dead mall that needs invigoration," he said.

Big changes expected

Representatives of Ashkenazy didn't give detailed plans for Northland but said they have been discussing renovation proposals with Southfield officials, said Pam Lightbody, marketing manager for both Northland and Eastland malls.

Lightbody said Eastland was in a similar decline when Ashkenazy bought that mall three years ago. She said she expected the new owners would make some of the same changes: Investing millions of dollars in improvements including exterior paint, a children's play area, a new multi-tenant building and new entrances.

Lightbody noted that after Ashkenazy bought Eastland, the mall landed a Burlington Coat Factory as an anchor store and expanded a Target store by 13,000 square feet. She said Northland, with anchors Macy's and Target, needs some special attention and rejuvenation. "It hasn't been refreshed in a long time," she said. "It needs some updating."

A revitalized Northland would be "a shot in the arm" for Southfield, said Nik Banda, Southfield's director of planning and economic development.

"The mall doesn't need to go away," he said. "It needs to be brought back to its original greatness."

New customer base needed

Northland's location near I-696, M-10 and the Northwestern Highway puts it in an ideal location for shoppers, said Brent Reetz, general manager of both Northland and Eastland. More than 800,000 people live within a seven-mile radius of Northland.

Ashkenazy's acquisition of Northland, "is an important step forward for southeastern Michigan," he said. "It has a deep commitment to providing a first-class shopping experience and sees great potential for Northland."

Northland retailers said they are eager for the new owners to breathe life back into the mall. Their customer base has been dwindling and changes need to be made quickly, they said.

"We definitely need something going on," said Nefertiti Steward, owner of Truth Bookstore, which has been in the mall for 15 years. "It just needs to be uplifted. We need big names to bring customers back. I'm hoping and praying it will make a difference."

Ricky Bhogalli, owner of Bhogalli Leather, said he is impressed with the new management. He said Ashkenazy representatives already visited his store and were responsive to his concerns about attracting more shoppers.

"I think the new people will be excellent," Bhogalli said. "I hope they bring the mall back to where it was."

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