

Business

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Warm temps, early start help beat retailers' hopes

Jaclyn Trop and Melissa Burden/ The Detroit News

The first official holiday shopping day is on track to be the biggest Black Friday in history, retail analysts and Metro Detroit mall managers reported, although some shoppers complained the bargains weren't as great as expected.

Curiosity lured tens of thousands of Metro Detroiters to local retailers Thursday night and Friday as many big box stores and a few shopping centers opened in the late hours of Thanksgiving or at the stroke of midnight and stayed open several hours longer than usual.

Some initial estimates projected that Black Friday might diminish in importance. But the warmer-than-usual weather in Metro Detroit and earlier start times helped stores in at least four malls report brisk sales that might lead to sales records.

"It looks like (Parisian is) going to have a record-breaking day," said Steve Berlow, general manager of the open-air Mall at Partridge Creek in Clinton Township, about the store that opened at midnight. Marketing Director Seok Chung said he is cautiously optimistic it could be a big day for the mall, too.

Still, shoppers from all corners of the region said the bargains didn't match their expectations.

"To be honest, I'm not impressed with that I've seen so far," said Bloomfield Township resident Cynthia Camilleri as she put a half-dozen DVDs — priced between \$1.99 and \$10 — into her cart at Target in Troy around 11 a.m. Friday.



Emily Scott of London, Ont., shops at the Nike store at Great Lakes Crossing Outlets in Auburn Hills on Thursday night. The mall opened at 9 p.m. as Black Friday sales started earlier than ever. (Bryan Mitchell / Special to The Detroit News)



Rachel Hazelett shops for a purse with her fiancé Craig Kunath, both of Harrison Township, inside Parisian at The Mall at Partridge Creek in Macomb Township on Black Friday. (John T. Greilick / The Detroit News)

"The movies maybe — sorta, kinda," she said. "But it's nothing I'd stand in an hour-long line for."

Nicole Neumann, 30, of Macomb Township started her shopping at 4 a.m. and hit more than a dozen stores at Partridge Creek and Lakeside Mall in Sterling Heights. But the deals weren't as good as in prior years, she said.

"There hasn't been any 'Wow, I can't believe it,'" Neumann said.

Many analysts now project that this year's Black Friday could be the biggest ever in sales and foot traffic. Chicago-based retail analyst ShopperTrak predicts that sales for the day could top \$20 billion for the first time in history.

A survey of merchants by the Michigan Retailers Association is forecasting a 6 percent gain, on average, for the holidays.

Parking lots were at capacity at Partridge Creek, Twelve Oaks in Novi, Somerset Collection in Troy and Great Lakes Crossing Outlets in Auburn Hills, which helped jump-start the Black Friday shopping in Metro Detroit with a 9 p.m. Thursday opening.

Somerset reported its strongest Black Friday turnout in memory. At 4 p.m., stores such as Vera Bradley, LEGO and the expanded Apple outlet still had lines out the door, Somerset spokesman Ed Nakfoor said.

This is "a great start to the season," he said.

Many stores, especially those open since midnight, were generating double-digit sales increases over the same day last year at Twelve Oaks and Partridge Creek, according to Bloomfield Hills-based Taubman Centers Inc., which owns both malls as well as Great Lakes Crossing and Fairlane Town Center.

The balmy weather played a part in getting shoppers out of the house, said Farmington Hills-based retail analyst Ken Dalto. The longer hours, better weather and strong merchandise mix will conspire to make this year's Black Friday the best in years, he said.

Some eagle-eyed shoppers did find good deals.

Paula Edson of Troy found the memory foam rug her daughter requested — marked down to \$19.99 from \$50 at Kohl's and cheaper than advertised at Bed Bath & Beyond, she said. "I'm definitely focused on price," she said.

By 12:15 p.m. Friday — 45 minutes before Kohl's early bird deals ended — most customers were in a line for the cash register that stretched all the way to the back of the store in Troy.

This year marked the first holiday season that stores drastically extended their hours by pushing their selling day into Thanksgiving. Other retailers opened as soon as the clock struck 12.

The Thursday post-dinner crowd at Great Lakes Crossing Outlets was comprised mostly of pairs or groups of teenagers, male and female, looking for a way to spend the evening.

"It's something to do," said Josh Rupright, 17, of Clarkston.

Canadians took advantage of the bargain hunting. Great Lakes Crossing estimated that 30 percent of the vehicles in its parking lot late Thursday were from across the border.

One of them was Gini Cook, 38, a Black Friday novice who came with three friends from the Sarnia, Ontario area. By early Friday afternoon, the quartet were at Lakeside Mall and had shopped for 16 hours straight.

Asked how much money she'd spent, Cook said, "Oh, that makes me cry."

The early openings prompted complaints from some retail workers upset about missing Thanksgiving dinner to report to their jobs and from shoppers who felt commerce was encroaching on the holiday spirit.

In addition, a small group of Occupy Detroit protesters entered a Macy's at Fairlane after 2 p.m. Friday, but were asked to leave because the mall doesn't allow protests on its property. The group live streamed its activities and civil encounter with mall security in the parking lot.

Other shoppers were disappointed they could not get the door-buster deals advertised.

Craig Kunath, 28, of Harrison Township said he and his fiancée didn't get a 42-inch Sharp LCD television for \$199.99 despite standing in line for nearly four hours on Thanksgiving at the Best Buy in Chesterfield.

"It just all seemed like a gimmick to get you there in line and hope you buy something else," he said. "We learned our lesson today."

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