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BUSINESS

Tampa Bay malls adding unconventional tenants to woo more shoppers

BY JUSTINE GRIFFIN

TAMPA — The days of heading to the mall just to shop are about over.

Through the years, malls in the Tampa Bay area and across the country have been adding new amenities, which began with movie theaters and have expanded to include grocery stores, fitness centers and sometimes even community or technical college classrooms, in an effort to draw consumers back into its stores.

Retail centers like Tampa's International Plaza and even the tired University Mall are filling vacant spaces with fewer stores and replacing them with experience-driven businesses. They're dropping the moniker "mall," too, and replacing it with "lifestyle center" to better define the change.

"It's about the experience — that's something today's customer is craving from shopping centers," said Faith Hope Consolo, chairman of The Retail Group with New York City-based Douglas Elliman Real Estate. "This means that the mall is continuing to innovate and find ways to be the center of its community."

University Mall is making room for a 37,000-square-foot "health club" as a part of an overhaul of the 41-year-old property near the University of South Florida. Renovations could begin as early as next year. The health club will be a key component in replacing the shuttered anchor space of the former JC Penney department store, which left the mall in 2005.

"A health club has many advantages. It brings customers in several times a week, at various times of the day," Consolo said.

University Mall isn't the first to consider a fitness center. Last year, an upscale spa and health club called Life Time Athletic, the top tier club under the Lifetime Fitness umbrella, opened next to Nordstrom in International Plaza. It filled a space left vacant by furniture retailer Robb & Stucky.

Members can work out, get a massage, have a manicure or get their hair colored inside. The club also has its own cafe and sells prepared meals to go.

It attracts Tampa locals who are "top 20 percent income earners," and who shop at stores like Nordstrom and Neiman Marcus before or after visiting the club, said general manager Joe Liotine.

It also reaches those who stay in nearby hotels for business trips.



This is the only Life Time Athletic club in the national chain that is connected to a mall, Liotine said, but it's also one of the brand's most successful.

"We have clients who drive here from as far away as Sarasota," he said. "And we have the highest member score than any other club in the country."

Adding amenities like health clubs to a retail mix helps fill the void left behind from shuttered retailers and creates new reasons for consumers to visit a mall, said retail analyst Jeff Green.

Whole Foods Market opened in the Westfield Countryside mall in Clearwater in September. The high-end grocer took over part of the Sears department store space on the west side of the mall, which faces the busy U.S. 19 thoroughfare.

"If you think about major malls in general, they have some of the best real estate in town. So when a traditional mall format doesn't work anymore, they're still in an accessible area which is usually in a retail node with other shopping centers around it," Green said.

Dick's Sporting Goods took over the former Saks Fifth Avenue space in Westshore Plaza. Before that, Dick's opened inside Westfield Citrus Park. The big box retailer is new to enclosed mall spaces.

Adding big box stores and health clubs is a logical next step for the evolution of malls, Consolo said.

"As some leases expire or an anchor may leave, there are few options to replace that much space that probably aren't already in the mall," she said.