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RETAIL

Variety of stores available for shoppers

By Emma Ritch
The Sun News

The Grand Strand's retail community is poised to take a breather.

After several years of major renovations and before the 2008 debut of two open-air shopping centers, 2007 will be a year for shoppers to acclimate to the changing retail offerings on the Grand Strand.

"I think this is a year of catching your breath and working with the projects you have," said Joe Perl, general manager of Colonial Mall-Myrtle Beach. "It'll be interesting as a consumer to see how this is going to play out."

Deb Bramlett, spokeswoman for Coastal Grand Myrtle Beach, said consumers' choice of shopping centers is growing, meaning each center has to fight more for its piece of the market.

"There are a lot of choices for the consumer right now, so we have to be smarter and better, and that means better customer service," Bramlett said. "There's more competition in retail [here] than there ever has been."

A few 2007 store openings have been announced already: Ethan Allen, La-Z-Boy, World Market and Lowes Foods stores.

The growing retail market is already one of the most important industries on the Grand Strand. When combined with the service industry, the category accounts for 67 percent of Horry County's jobs.

The region's retail market is also drawing attention nationwide. The National Research Bureau ranked the Myrtle Beach area as the most developed retail market in the country in 2005, at 43.22 square feet of shopping center space per resident, compared to the national average of 20.3 square feet per capita. The high rank is in part attributable to the low year-round population, but the designation is still notable because the population must sustain the industry in the off season.

As that rank is affected this year by incoming residents and fluctuations in retail space, consumers will be able to use 2007 to adjust to the many recent changes in area shopping centers:

Colonial Mall has finished renovations to its state-of-the-art theater and will operate its first summer season with the upgrade. The 12-screen theater has stadium seating and digital projection.

Coastal Grand has added 48 stores in the 2½ years it has been open, including many of its outparcels. La-Z-Boy and Ethan Allen furniture stores will open next to Rooms to Go, but company officials aren't saying what other retailers will come in 2007.

At Broadway at the Beach, the IMAX theater is being renovated and will open as the IMAX 3-D theater in May. New stores that are planned for Broadway include RideMakerz, Club Libby Lu, Department 56, Out of Africa, Fric N Frac and a second location of The Fudgery.

The Arcadian Shores Commons shopping center on Kings Road will get a Goody's department store in March. The addition is the final part of initial development there, which includes Ross Dress for Less, Marshalls and 90,000 square feet of leased small shops space.

The Seaboard Commons center in Myrtle Beach will fill the gap from the demolished Sports Authority building with Ross Dress for Less, Cost Plus World Market and Sally's Beauty Supply.

Lowes Foods plans to open two 47,000-square-foot locations this year: one at S.C. 544 and U.S. 17 Bypass and the other at S.C. 707 and Tournament Boulevard in Murrells Inlet.

In late 2007 or early 2008, the company will open a Lowes Foods in the Grande Dunes Towne Center at U.S. 17 Bypass and 82nd Avenue North. A 47,000-square-foot store is planned for Ocean Isle Beach, N.C.

U.S. 501 is seeing more growth around Coastal Carolina University. The new University Commons shopping center has Firehouse Subs, Five Guys Sports Bar, Moe's Southwest Grill, Rotelli's, Ultra Tan, Jade's Japanese Hibachi, Goin' Postal, SunCom and a Crescent Bank branch office. Prudential B&C Realty will open a Conway area sales office there.

Inlet Square has released artists' renderings of the open-air center planned for completion in 2008. Renovations started late last year. The 100,000-square-foot expansion will add an outdoor courtyard and two anchors. Watch for the expansion of the center before the end of the year, but developers aren't announcing tenants yet.

Developers of The Market Common also have released artists' renderings for the 113-acre retail and residential development on the former Myrtle Beach Air Force Base. The space is about 90 percent leased, and passers-by can now see buildings start to go up.

The open-air, mixed-use developments in progress at Inlet Square and The Market Common are currently the most popular type of retail center with shoppers, and developers are taking note, according to the International Council of Shopping Centers.

"Lifestyle centers are still the hottest retail concepts in America. Those are being built all over the country, and probably more will be built next year," said consumer analyst Britt Beemer of America's Research Group.

The move to high-end retail - stores planned to open in The Market Common in 2008 include Banana Republic, Anthropologie, William Sonoma, P.F. Chang's China Bistro, and Tommy Bahama Restaurant and Store - could put much of the newest shopping out of reach for the average Grand Strand resident. (The median income in Horry County is \$49,700; Georgetown County, \$48,700; and Brunswick County, N.C., \$36,000).

As the long-term outlook for the economy remains uncertain, industry groups predict many consumers will hold onto their money in 2007.

The National Retail Federation forecasts a 4.8 percent increase in retail spending from last year, down from the 6.3 percent growth last year. The organization predicts subdued first-half economic growth because of the housing slowdown, high energy costs and lackluster employment growth.

Retailers insist there are plenty of shopping options for any income bracket.

Outlet centers here, for example, offer discounted goods. And the Strand has been home to high-end stores such as the Coach outlet for years.

"I think we're coming in line with some of your major cities," Perl said.

Beemer said investors look at high-end retail as a safer investment than bargain shops because profits are higher.

"The high-end market has been the category that's had the best sales over the past five years, mostly because of stock market gains and corporate bonuses," Beemer said.

"Luxury has done very well the last year and probably will do very well this year. Retailers are trying to broaden their opportunities, and they look at Myrtle Beach and say, 'Myrtle Beach residents may not be the best market for us, but we might appeal to the visitors.'"

Deb Bramlett | spokeswoman for Coastal Grand

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