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AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

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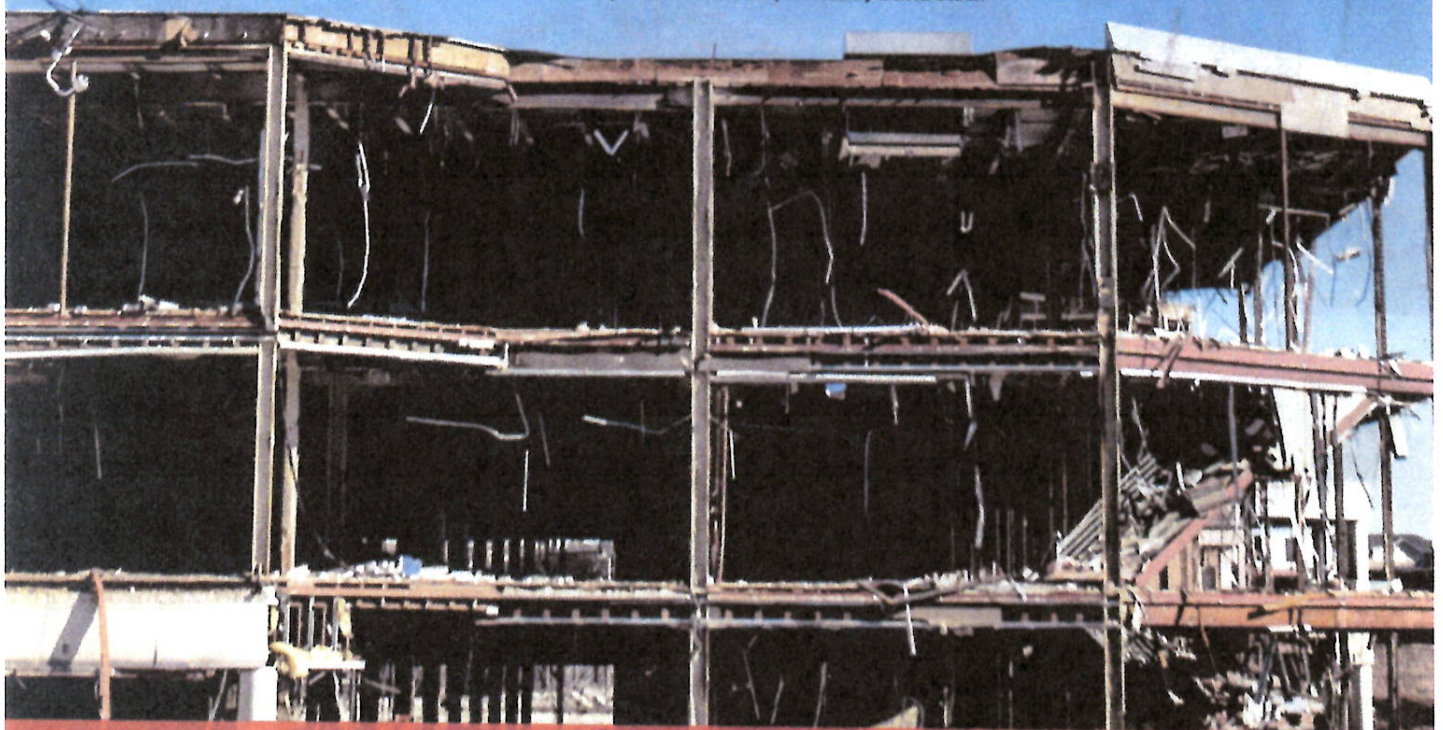
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AN **UNCERTAIN** FUTURE

As new developments take off in Owings Mills, mall site remains a question mark

By Justin Silberman | Photos by David Stuck



Wrecking balls and bulldozers have ripped through the walls, roof and foundation that housed Owings Mills Mall, leaving the once-premier upscale Baltimore shopping center a shadow of its former self.

A pile of mostly dust and rubble now, the mall appears to be the last piece of the equation for what is likely to become, once again, an Owings Mills town center.

Elsewhere in Owings Mills, both

Foundry Row and Metro Centre already have become hubs for local commerce, making the need for the mall site to follow suit even more pressing.

“It is extremely important that we get the mall right and that it is complementary of what’s been going on so far,” said Baltimore County Councilman Julian Jones, whose 4th District includes the mall. “What I call it is the Triple Crown of Owings Mills — and that third crown, the mall — needs to be

complementary of those two developments [Foundry Row and Metro Centre]. We want the mall, or town center, to be something everyone is happy and proud of.”

The state of the Owings Mills Mall property has long been a topic of much debate and speculation among developers, politicians and residents. In addition, there is growing angst about the future of the vacant site and the lack of urgency on the part of site owner Kimco Realty Corp.



The site of the Owings Mills Mall

Jones, a Woodstock Democrat, met with four Kimco representatives on Dec. 21 to review Kimco's redevelopment plans. At this point, Jones said, its primary focus and goal for the mall site is "a power center, a group of big-box stores."

Jones, who said Kimco is in the process of putting together a tenant mix, expects to learn more in the next few months about the New York-based company's plans for the mall.

"It's my goal to help [Kimco] be successful, because I want them to be successful," said Jones, who added he has conducted 10 to 12 meetings with Kimco officials. "I wish things would have moved faster, but we don't have all the cards. It's up to the retailers if they want



to come here, which is the other part of this equation."

Talk of redeveloping the mall began publicly in 2011, when Kimco purchased half of the property from then-owner General Growth Properties. Kimco, which took sole ownership of the mall site earlier this year, was recently given preliminary approval from the Baltimore County Council for an open-air center.

But Kimco has offered few

specifics regarding its intentions for the land.

In a prepared statement, the company told the JT it is "considering several different retail options ... which will enhance the available shopping options and complement the surrounding community."

"A large-scale redevelopment has many moving pieces and takes an extended period of time to successfully execute," the statement said. "We are

encouraged by the considerable interest we've received from potential retailers at this early stage."

Time Will Tell

Stakeholders are worried that if the mall site fails, Owings Mills will never reach its ceiling, and all of the work that has been done around the area will be diminished.

Brian Gibbons, whose Owings Mills-based Greenberg Gibbons

Demolition at the Owings Mills mall began this past summer.



has redeveloped Foundry Row from the former Solo Cup Factory, said he is very excited about Owings Mills.

Earlier this year, his company showed its commitment to the community with two high-profile acquisitions, purchasing the 19-acre Reisterstown Shopping Center for \$34.5 million and the 104,624-square-foot St. Thomas Shopping Center for an undisclosed amount.

“Right now, there seems to be a little bit more traffic in both Reisterstown and Owings Mills, which really helps everybody,” Gibbons said. “Both of those areas, in my opinion, are going to continue to perform at a high level.”

According to the United States Census Bureau, Owings Mills, designated as a growth area by the county in the 1980s, has hit its stride in recent years. Median household income last year was \$69,891 with a population of 30,622 residents.

Continued population growth and wealth are two reasons Jones feels Kimco remains committed to moving forward with its plans

for the Owings Mills Mall.

In May 2015, Kimco unveiled four renderings of what could potentially replace the Owings Mills Mall. All involved two rows of retail shops with sufficient parking and plenty of green space. The site plans showed the largest retail space would be 68,000 square feet with other retail and restaurants ranging in size from 6,300 square feet to 65,500 square feet.

After his most recent meeting with Kimco, Jones said — when looking at other retailers in the area — he “would imagine Kimco is talking with retailers such as Lowes, Target and Costco.” He also confirmed Kimco officials have had discussions with Walmart about adding one of its supercenters as an anchor, but there has yet to be an agreement.

One way or another, Jones said, he is confident some type of development will start to take place at the mall site within two years after Kimco finalizes its plan with prospective tenants. He added that 2017 will be a “big year in terms of expecting something to happen.

“From what Kimco has told me, their desire would be to do the retail first and then come back later for other things,” Jones said. “The retail Kimco is talking about doesn’t even come to close what was there before in terms of the mall. That size is gone.”

As part of the redevelopment, Jones said Kimco has also vowed to spend \$8 million on renovations for the AMC Owings Mills 17 movie theater, which opened to great fanfare in 1998.

Jones’ colleagues hope Kimco stays true to its word and brings further quality development to Owings Mills.

In a prepared statement, Baltimore County Executive Kevin Kamenetz told the JT he was pleased that the owner of the once-vibrant shopping-destination-turned-eyesore has taken some of his suggestions into account.

“We are encouraged that [Kimco is] finally actively marketing the property, something I have strongly encouraged in many meetings with Kimco senior management,” Kamenetz

said. “I have consistently urged Kimco to aim high, as they secure tenants looking to make the most of the strong Owings Mills market.”

Jones, meanwhile, held a pair of community meetings in late August to take input from community members on what they would like to see fill the vacant property. He said many residents stressed that they did not want to see a Walmart Supercenter as an anchor tenant and that Kimco should aim to lure “higher quality” tenants.

Baltimore County District 2 Councilwoman Vicki Almond, a Reisterstown Democrat whose district shares a border with Jones’ district, expressed concern that Kimco might not have the community’s best interest at heart.

If a Walmart Supercenter opened at the mall, Almond said, two nearby Walmart stores — one at 8730 Liberty Road in Randallstown and the other at 9750 Reisterstown Road in Owings Mills — would likely suffer or close altogether.

As a result, her fear is that both the current Walmart

locations would then become vacant spaces, much like the Shoppers on Reisterstown Road in Owings Mills that closed in Jones' district nearly six years ago.

"I have a problem trusting Kimco," Almond said, "because their intent is on the bottom line. That may be good enough for them, but it is not good enough for us. Because Kimco doesn't live in the area, they don't understand that what goes on at the mall will affect all of us."

Different Ideas

Residents have also shared similar sentiments, noting the importance of the mall site establishing a unique identity to avoid the shortcomings of why the mall failed in the first place.

Mike Frank, a lifelong 30-year-old Reisterstown resident, believes big-box stores or a mixed-use center in general are not the solutions Kimco should be proposing. Instead, he would like to see the land used for recreational purposes.

"Bringing a Kohl's, for example, instead of Walmart is equally as disruptive," Frank said. "It sounds great conceptually to build these big-box stores and apartment complexes, but how will they impact the community? It might not be as great of a financial opportunity to build recreational use, but we are littered with those other options all up and down the Reisterstown Road corridor."

Rayna Verstandig, a 19-year-old Pikesville native whose father, Carl, specializes in the redevelopment of shopping centers around the country as CEO of Pikesville-based America's Realty, has other ideas. She said she fully backs a concept at

the mall centered on big-box stores such as Costco, Lowes and Walmart because she feels they would better serve the local population.

"The area surrounding the mall is saturated with retail stores," Verstandig said. "So it's important to stray away from re-establishing stores such as Macy's or Boscov's, which have previously failed to generate substantial revenue."

On Nov. 21, Jones introduced a bill that would have prohibited a retail department or discount store such as a Walmart Supercenter in excess of more than 100,000 square feet in Owings Mills.

Just eight days later, however, Jones pulled the bill hours before it would have been discussed at a council meeting and then ultimately sent to the floor for a vote.

"To be reasonable with [Kimco], we pulled the legislation," Jones said. "It doesn't mean I can't put in legislation anytime I want, so it was never an issue of now or never. We have plenty of time to do whatever we think is necessary."

Jones added: "At the time, I thought it was necessary, but there were some internal agreements that were made, which is

why the bill was pulled." He said he could not elaborate on those "internal agreements" because "Kimco is under a confidentiality agreement," and he "has to be respectful of that."

Almond, County Council chairwoman, said she thinks the bill would have generated enough support from the seven-member council to pass.

A spokeswoman for Kamenetz said the county executive declined to comment on whether or not he would sign such a bill since he does not speculate on pending legislation.

Elsewhere, Development Flourishes

About a mile-and-a-half away from the mall, Foundry Row, the new \$140 million retail center at the intersection of Reisterstown and Painters Mill roads anchored by Wegmans has flourished.

Gibbons, CEO of Greenberg Gibbons, said nearly 95 percent of the 50-acre property has been leased with more shops opening in the coming months. By April, Gibbons said, he expects 100 percent of the 356,000-square-foot retail space to be occupied.

An additional 40,000 square feet for office buildings is expected to be completed in April and will be fully rented out to LifeBridge Health, which had originally agreed to lease 75 percent of the space.

Brian White, president of Northwest Hospital and senior vice president of LifeBridge Health, said the decision to set up a branch at Foundry Row was a no-brainer.

"What we have seen at Foundry Row is a transformative project and an opportunity too good to pass up," said White, who also sits on the Owings Mills Corporate Roundtable, which meets monthly. "It really blows my mind how Gibbons and [Howard] Brown [chairman of David S. Brown Enterprises] have executed their visions. They are clearly committed to this area, which is something I think we need to see with the mall."

The Metro Centre, a \$200 million project of Owings Mills-based David S. Brown Enterprises, has also enhanced Owings Mills' appeal. With construction starting five years ago on a 45-acre parcel of land located off Interstate 795, it boasts retail, luxury apartments, a branch of the Community

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— Baltimore County Council chair Vicki Almond



College of Baltimore County and the county's largest public library branch, adjacent to the Owings Mills Metro.

For his part, Gibbons said the mall property is perhaps the third and most important piece of the puzzle.

Gibbons sees a lot of untapped potential at the mall for residential homes, retail shops and office buildings, among other amenities.

In fact, specifically for that reason, Gibbons said his company attempted to acquire the site in "2014 or 2015" but was turned down by Kimco.

Brown also tried to purchase the property, according to *The Baltimore Sun*. His company even built a road bridging his Metro Centre project to the mall. Brown did not respond to multiple requests through a spokesman seeking comment.

After failing to secure the

property individually, Gibbons told the JT that both he and Brown sent Kimco a joint proposal with a check for an undisclosed sum in an unsuccessful bid to buy the property.

Because Gibbons and Brown have so much invested in Owings Mills, Gibbons felt they had a better vision on how to effectively cultivate the 100-acre site at the mall.

"We felt that if we jointly developed [the mall], we could do it in a really harmonious way to help lift the entire area, because it's such an important piece of property," Gibbons said.

Time Marches On

Proponents of the area such as Gibbons have urged Kimco to come up with a sustainable long-term project, given the mall's checkered history.

Welcomed with open arms

in 1986 as the area's go-to destination, the mall was considered a rousing success in its early years.

On its first day, the 820,000-square-foot facility opened with more than 155 shops and was patronized by an estimated 100,000 people. Champagne toasts marked the grand opening, while gold dust and pink feathers fell from the ceiling in celebration of the new "fashion mall."

But its reputation deteriorated in later years. Some point to the death of Christina Brown as the beginning of the mall's decline. An employee of a cleaning company under contract to Saks Fifth Avenue, Brown was shot and killed in 1992 while walking on a path from the mall to the Metro station.

Saks abruptly left in January 1996, followed by the departure of other high-end retailers such as Lord & Taylor in 2002.

At that point, a number of stores started to disappear, and by September 2015, the mall closed off its interior doors. The last two remaining tenants, department store anchors J.C. Penney and Macy's, vacated the premises two months later.

Mark Stewart, president of the Reisterstown-Owings Mills-Glyndon Coordinating Council, said he wants to see the mall site adapt with the times. He hopes to see something in the mold of Nottingham Square in White Marsh, an outdoor center that features a collection of retail stores and restaurant franchises such as FedEx Office, Noodle & Co., Starbucks and Next Day Blinds, among others.

"The entity itself of a mall with a movie theater like we had in Owings Mills has gone the way of a dinosaur," Stewart said. "Time marches on." JT

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