



THE SHOPS OF GRAND RIVER, ROSTER UP TO 44 STORES
Outlet mall set to open in October, expects to draw shoppers from wide area

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By Michael Tomberlin

Eleven new retailers are on board for the Shops of Grand River, giving the outlet mall being built in Leeds a total of 44 commitments, with more expected before an Oct. 28 grand opening.

The new retailers add variety to a previously announced lineup that includes Nike, Polo and Tommy Hilfiger.

There's Black & Decker for shoppers looking for tools and appliances. Jos. A. Bank, Talbots and Chico's will be there to sell dress clothes. Sterling Jewelers will join, as will Corningware Corelle Revere for cookware.

Developers of the \$127 million project say there will be even more variety when future commitments give the outlet mall a total of around 65 stores and restaurants.

"We've been able to assemble a listing of tenants that bring distinctive brands to shoppers," said Doug Neil, a Daniel Corp. executive developing the project.

The mall will open with 330,000 square feet and will feature stand-alone restaurants, banks and hotels adjacent to the main center.

"We've got a number of tenants that are finalizing discussions," Neil said. "We have several leases out for signature now and we would expect to have an excess of 60 tenants. There are still a few surprises."

Neil said the project's momentum could accelerate plans for an expansion of another 150,000 square feet, giving Shops of Grand River a total of 120 stores when fully developed.

"Given the support from the marketplace and the momentum that has been established, we expect to move forward and will hopefully be following this with an expansion," he said.

Birmingham-based Daniel, USS Real Estate and the Retirement Systems of Alabama -- the same team that collaborated on Hoover's Ross Bridge development -- are creating Grand River. The outlet mall is a centerpiece of an even grander Grand River plan. Over the next several years, developers want to add thousands of homes and 700 acres of retail and offices as part of a 6,500-acre Grand River community.



Hoar Construction is the general contractor on the retail center, which was designed by CMH Architects Inc.

Though Shops of Grand River is the most ambitious outlet mall project in the Birmingham area, it's not the first. That distinction belongs to WaterMark Place, a project built a decade ago next to what's now called the Alabama Adventure amusement park in Bessemer.

WaterMark has seen its stores dwindle from around 40 when it opened to eight today. Six of those retailers have announced plans to open in Shops of Grand River, casting their future at WaterMark into doubt. One of the remaining two, Liz Claiborne, said last month it is closing.

WaterMark's new owner, Bessemer businessman and auto dealer Anthony Underwood, is creating an alternate plan for the property that focuses on tourism, dining, entertainment and some specialty shopping.

UAB retail expert Bob Robicheaux said WaterMark had many problems that plagued it since opening day -- problems that Shops of Grand River won't face.

"Looking back now, WaterMark Place was almost dead on arrival," Robicheaux said. "The Shops of Grand River will have much more visibility from the interstate, a better development team and the benefit of having the Bass Pro Shops at the same interstate exit."

He added that said the one-two punch of a large outlet mall and the Bass Pro Shops will probably draw shoppers from a wide area.

"It's a much larger pile of sugar than what you had at WaterMark Place," he said.

Robicheaux and Neil said trends show that outlet mall shopping is growing in popularity as shoppers embrace frugality.

"The consumer has become more price-conscious and not less price-conscious, given the recent economic cycle," Neil said. "As part of that consumer mindset, outlets have become more mainstream than ever before. With the focus and conditioning of the consumer towards discounts and a sense of value, the outlet format and the lines between other more traditional retail formats are going to be blended."

The level of commitment from well-known retailers is a positive sign for the outlet mall's prospects, he added.



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"The tenants have been very supportive," Neil said. "You have to go to the other side of Atlanta or Nashville or the Gulf Coast to find an outlet comparable to the Shops of Grand River and these retailers recognize that sort of opportunity."

Neil said some retailers are finishing work on their space. Some site improvement and landscaping work has already started, and details are being worked for a grand-opening celebration in late October.

"We expect to have a very, very busy holiday shopping season," he said.