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Troubled mall may get new owner

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FAIRFIELD — The Forest Fair Village may soon face another major change, this time in the form of a new owner.

The struggling mall, formerly known as Cincinnati Mills, has been owned by New York-based Worldwide Properties since 2002. However, Hamilton County court documents, the city of Forest Park, and a tenant at the mall indicate that a sale is pending.

The 1.5 million square-foot mall straddles the cities of Forest Park and Fairfield. Paul Brehm, the economic development director of Forest Park, said Thursday a California-based development group was doing due diligence in pursuing a sale at the mall. He declined to divulge more specific details.

Brehm said this group “appears to be open to working with partners on the project. They and we see a lot of potential on that land.”

Whether that potential means a retail shopping mall any longer is in question. Both Brehm and Tim Bachman, the director of development for the city of Fairfield, believe it might be wise to seek some sort of mixed use approach that involves office space or even hotels.

“The mall is in dire need of an entity that has significant vision to re-position the mall. It’s a struggle, because some of the storefronts have been vacant for 20 years. To re-position it for success, it needs to be mixed use, not all retail,” Bachman said.

Brehm said Worldwide Properties has tried to do that, but he thinks their hands have been tied by various tax issues that have dogged the mall for years, leaving the owner without the financial resources to make any redevelopment work. A representative for Worldwide Properties declined to comment Thursday.

Bachman thinks past redevelopment failed because tenants were being asked to put their own capital in the projects.

“That’s a lot of risk, and if the tenant is the only one putting up the money, it’s not going to work,” he said.

Christine Rindler, the owner of Bee U Retail and Consignment at the mall, has been a tenant there less than a year. She said that a sale of the mall was “in progress,” though she didn’t know the details. She said the mall doesn’t have much foot traffic, but she got an offer she couldn’t pass on to open her own business.

“I’m a single mom with four boys. This was my giant leap of blind faith to be self-sufficient, and I wanted to do so in a way where I could help the community ... (the mall) offered me a really good rent and a really big space. Rent everywhere else was going to be 10 times as much, and nobody was willing to give me a chance.”

Multiple dead ends

It’s the latest chapter of a long and tangled story, with multiple changes in names and ownership that have resulted in a series of proposals, including an ice rink, that ended up never taking off. The mall is nearly deserted, with the few remaining stores including the anchors Babies R Us, Kohl’s and Bass Pro Shops, which is planning a move to West Chester Twp.

Last year, mall manager Delmer Helton told the Journal-News that the mall was in the process of finding a new leasing agent, with a goal of having one in place around January of this year. Mall management did not return several calls by the Journal-News, and a visit to the mall on Thursday revealed the mall management office was vacant and locked.

According to our news partner WCPO 9 On Your Side, a lawsuit regarding the mall was filed April 2 in Hamilton County Common Pleas Court. In the lawsuit, real estate consultant Shaul Vaknin alleges Worldwide Properties owner Alex Demetriades was trying to flip the mall.

Vaknin claims he struck a deal with Demetriades in 2010 to provide services that would “increase the profile” of the “distressed commercial property” with the goal of selling it. That deal was followed by a second agreement, according to the lawsuit, that gives Vaknin 10 percent of the gross proceeds of the property’s sale in exchange for Vaknin’s consulting services. Vaknin said he “incurred a substantial amount of time and out of pocket expenses” in his service to the mall.

He’s suing because he believes Demetriades has “entered into an agreement with a qualified buyer for the sale of the property.” He’s seeking damages in excess of \$25,000 and details on the expected sale and all the correspondence that led to it.

Potential for life

Despite the mall’s checkered history and lack of customers, Brehm and Bachman think something could be made of it.

“That mall needs vision, capital, and maybe a different financial model. It’s been too skewed in the past,” he said. “But there are parties who want to see it succeed.”

Brehm said that with such a tangled past, redevelopment “is not going to happen overnight. It’s a very complex redevelopment project. If this has 100 steps, we’re on step three.”