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To stay afloat, CT malls are looking to fill large, empty retail spaces with apartments, condominiums and offices



Luther Turmelle

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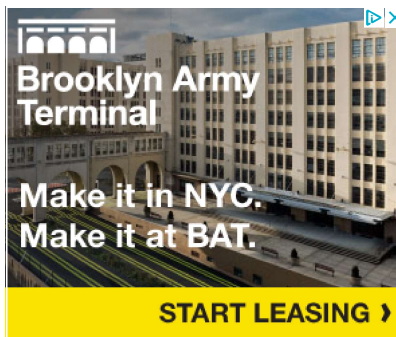


An artist's rendition of what Centennial's makeover of the Connecticut Post Mall might look like from the south end of the retail center looking north.
Contributed Photo /

As retail centers face an uncertain future due of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the continued growth of e-commerce, mall owners in Connecticut and elsewhere are increasingly turning to redevelopment plans that include mixed-use components.


Long a buzzword used by planners, mixed-use development essentially means blending retail or commercial businesses in close proximity with office space, rental apartments, condominiums or other uses.

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No fewer than six of Connecticut's shopping malls are in various phases of exploring mixed-use options. Texas-based Centennial, which owns the Connecticut Post Mall, proposed building luxury apartments on the periphery of the retail center last year, but that plan was rejected by Milford officials.

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Even the SoNo Collection, which opened in October 2019 and is regarded by some as one of the state's premiere malls, has plans for mixed-use development. Signs outside the Norwalk mall show plans for a fitness facility and some variety of medical component.

Other shopping malls considering mixed-use development include Meriden Mall; Westfarms, which straddles the town line between Farmington and West Hartford; Crystal Mall in Waterford; Enfield Square Mall; and Westfield Trumbull Mall.

Of this group, the Westfield Trumbull Mall is furthest along in the process; next month, ground will be broken for 260 market-rate rental units on the mall's periphery along Main Street, according to Rina Bakalar, the town's economic and community development director.

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The apartments will be built on land that once housed single-family homes that the mall bought up over many years, Bakalar said. The last property was purchased in either 2016 or 2017, she said.

The luxury apartment complex, which Bakalar said will include such amenities as a swimming pool and health club, will take 12 to 18 months to build. It could take another year or more before the first residents begin moving into the units, she said.

"Malls are struggling and we need to put more people on this property," Bakalar said. "I don't see regional mall properties surviving without mixing uses. This is not just here: It's happening all over the country."

Adding rental units to the Westfield Trumbull property will add to "the diversity of housing stock," she said.

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Milford mall makeover

An artist's rendition of what Centennial's makeover of the Connecticut Post Mall might look like.
Contributed Photo /

Steven Levin, the chief executive officer of Centennial, recently revealed new details about plans for remaking the Connecticut Post Mall that weren't made public last year in the run up to the Milford PZB's rejection of luxury apartments on the former Sears Automotive Center.

That plan — the first phase of the mall's makeover — called for 300 luxury apartment units. Levin said that part of Centennial's vision for the property remains intact.

Ultimately, the company's concept is to essentially to turn the mall inside out; stores located in a climate-controlled, indoor environment would be moved into a new take on the old concept of downtown shopping districts, along with plenty of public space for good measure.

Levin's announcement made public a second phase that includes demolishing the entire wing of the mall formerly occupied by Sears. That would give Centennial 450,000 square feet of commercial space to work with.

Levin said potential tenants could include a medical center, a technology innovation center, office space, an additional 200-unit residential project and two more plazas.

"We don't have a specific plan past the first phase of this at this moment, but once we start the project on Phase 1, this vision is going to be part of the entire marketing campaign as what we are doing with the mall," Levin told the PZB. "Hopefully, when people see what's happening, office tenants, lab sciences and all who are looking for spaces in this area will be showing up saying 'We need 20,000 square feet.'"

Milford Mayor Ben Blake said Centennial's plans will be included in the revised edition of the city's Plan of Conservation and Development. The updated plan, which covers the entire city, will be released sometime next year, according to Blake.

“What Centennial did was present the Planning and Zoning Board with its vision for inclusion in that plan,” he said.

But Blake is adamant that including a housing component in any long-term makeover of the Connecticut Post Mall is a non-starter in terms of trying to reach some compromise between Centennial and city officials. Having a clearly defined downtown and residential areas has benefited the city over the years, he said.

“Milford has the largest grand list in New Haven County, and I think that is due to some extent to the foresight of not having the Post Road go through the center of the downtown,” Blake said.

Blake maintains if city officials were to allow luxury apartments on the mall property, it would set off an explosion of residential development in commercial areas every time land owners needed a long-term boost of consumer traffic near a business.

Despite his opposition to the luxury apartments concept Centennial officials presented last year, Blake said he fully appreciates the mall’s importance to the city.

“The Milford mall has been a very important part of the community for many years,” Blake said. “We hope that it continues to flourish.”

Welcome to my office — at the mall

A signs outside the SoNo Collection advertise plans for mixed-use space that is planned to be developed adjacent to the Norwalk mall. Increasingly, mall owners, including at least a half dozen in Connecticut, are turning to mixed-use projects to help increase foot traffic in their retail centers.

Contributed photo /

The owner of the former Lord & Taylor anchor store in the Westfarms Mall has hired CBRE to market the now-vacant 120,000-square-foot department store as high-end office or medical redevelopment. Lord & Taylor went bankrupt earlier this year; Canada-based Hudson Bay Co., which owns Lord & Taylor's property around the country, brought in CBRE to market the property.

Jason Beske, a senior planner with Virginia-based global design firm Stantec, which has studied redevelopment of retail properties, said one reason office space works within the framework of an old-school shopping mall is that "office workers want to be close to places that are walkable with outdoor spaces."

"When malls were originally created, the interior dimensions, the walking space, were meant to replicate streets," Beske said.

How malls are being redeveloped across the country, Beske added, varies widely. "There are anywhere from full redevelopments to repositioning of malls," he said. "In Ohio, outside of Cleveland, they tore down the Randalltown Mall and turned it into an Amazon fulfillment center. The Highland Mall in Austin, Texas was turned into Austin Community College and a mixed-use neighborhood."

Other successful mixed-use mall makeovers include the One Hundred Oaks Mall in Nashville, much of which Beske said was largely claimed by Vanderbilt University Medical School. Some retailers that remain on the mall site, he said, are grouped closely together.

Brentwood Town Centre, a mall outside of Vancouver, British Columbia, has been converted into mixed-use complex with multiple skyscrapers on the property, according to Beske. The ability to successfully redevelop malls with sagging fortunes "depends on who has ownership of the mall and how sophisticated they are, as well as officials of the community the mall is located in," he said.

"Some people can be extremely visionary," Beske said. "Others just see in black and white or a ledger. Being within a community that has a vision for what a property can become, or at least what the community needs or desires, is helpful."

One general rule of thumb: having between 1,000 and 2,000 dwelling units within a five-minute walk of a retail center is needed in order to support one block of main street retail, according to Stantec — Beske's firm.

"It is inevitable there will be mall closures," Beske said. "In losing malls, communities will be losing large revenue and job generators."

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Crystal Mall in flux

An exterior view of the Crystal Mall in Waterford.
Contributed photo

The redevelopment plans for other Connecticut malls remain murky, largely because the owners of the retail centers haven't provided officials in the host communities with significant details.

Sears closed its Crystal Mall location in Waterford at the end of 2018, and Macy's announced earlier this year that its store there would be closing.

Abby Piersall, planning director for the town of Waterford, said all they know about the future of the Crystal Mall, which is owned by Simon Properties, has come from media reports.

“They have not spoken to us directly,” Piersall said last week. “We are very desirous to speak with them directly.”

Officials with Simon Properties did not respond to phone calls made by Hearst Connecticut Media regarding the Crystal Mall’s future ownership or any mixed-use plans the company has for it.

Simon Properties has a successful mixed-use mall located on the outskirts of Austin, Texas; the first phase of the 303-acre complex opened in 2007, using land that had once been slated for a corporate campus for technology companies.

Domain-Austin has such high end retailers as Louis Vuitton, Neiman Marcus, Coach and Tiffany among its portfolio of 100 retailers. The mixed-use complex is also home to more than 800 residential units and Class A office space. There are also four on-site hotels within the complex, including a Westin hotel, according to the mall’s [website](#).

Two other malls in a state of flux are the Enfield Square mall, near the Massachusetts border, and the Meriden Mall. Both are owned in part by a Great Neck, N.Y. company, Namdar Realty Group.

Namdar has hired a Minnesota-based company, MedCraft Health Care Real Estate, to market the Meriden Mall’s former Macy’s anchor store as space for medical offices. Namdar officials did not return calls regarding plans for the mall’s future.

The mall is located across Lewis Avenue from the main campus of MidState Medical Center, which is part of the Hartford HealthCare system. Tina Varona, a spokeswoman for Hartford HealthCare, said “we are continuously evaluating needs and space, but we aren’t looking at this particular space at this time.”

Nelson Tereso, deputy economic development director for the town of Enfield, said Namdar has sold one or two of the eight parcels that make up the mall property there. Town officials gave Namdar the necessary approvals to subdivide the Enfield Square property last year.

A traffic study of the area surrounding the mall has already been completed, and a marketing study of how make the best use of the property is in the works, according to Tereso. The pandemic has also hindered some of the efforts to make progress in re-envisioning the mall, he said.

“The bottom line, though, is that as a private property owner, we can’t force them to share their long term plans with us,” Tereso said.

Namdar and two other Long Island-based companies — Ch. Hakimi Global Inc., and Mason Asset Management — bought Enfield Square for \$11.4 million. That price is low enough that the mall’s owners “really have no incentive to do anything for a long time,” said John Clapp, a professor emeritus of real estate at the University of Connecticut.

“They got it at such low price they can afford to wait around until market condition and other factors are more favorable,” Clapp said. “You’re probably looking at a 10- to 20-year time frame before something substantive is done there.”

Clapp said he doesn’t see the Crystal Mall closing entirely and becoming what is known in popular culture as “a dead mall.”

“I would guess they will keep it alive somehow,” Clapp said of the mall’s lenders. “[They] typically aren’t in the business of owning property, so they may try and flip it to companies who invest in distressed properties. But then you have to ask: what

are their interests? What are they going to do with it?"

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