

New faces at the mall

12 shops and restaurants open up as part of expansion plan

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West Coast style clothing, crystal sculptures and a new restaurant featuring American cookout fare are being added to the tenant mix at the Westfield Annapolis mall.

The Annapolis mall has signed deals with a dozen new stores and restaurants, part of the finishing touches on its \$160 million expansion.



Colleen Dugan - The Capital

M.J. Carroll, left, a manager trainee at Buckle, a new store at Westfield Annapolis mall, shows Pat Jones of Millersville some Affliction brand clothing for her son. Buckles debuted with its West Coast and East Coast style clothing at the mall last month.

Mall officials said they've signed leases with stores including The Buckle Inc., a growing Nebraska-based company offering laid-back West Coast styles and fashion brands including Guess, Affliction, Lucky Brand Jeans and Billabong.

Swarovski debuted a week ago with its high-end crystal jewelry and figurines. And Punk's Backyard Grill, a restaurant concept re-creating the American backyard cookout with such menu items as shrimp skewers, slow-roasted pulled pork and burgers, will debut in Annapolis in October after signing a 10-year lease with the mall last month. Company officials said the mall restaurant is its first and they plan to expand regionally.

In addition to the new stores are existing shops that have been remodeled including Crabtree & Evelyn, Johnston & Murphy, Auntie Anne's, Regis, Select Comfort, Express and Brookstone.

The stores are part of an expansion project heralded by Anne Arundel County officials as a major economic development project adding 60 new stores and a 240,000-square-foot wing that was unveiled last fall.

Westfield, which owns the mall, came up with its tenant portfolio after research that involved talking to stores based on customer feedback, said Scott deGraffenreid, mall marketing director.

"We feel like we've got a great tenant mix," Mr. deGraffenreid said. "We're appealing to all different types of shoppers."

He said Buckle, Swarovski and Pumpkin Patch, a children's fashion clothing store, have already opened. The rest of the new stores, which will be interspersed throughout the mall and its new wing, are slated to open this spring or summer depending on corporate schedules, he said.

Potbelly Sandwich Works also plans to open a location at the mall, in addition to its store at the Annapolis Harbour Center, he said.

New store officials said they were excited to open at the mall.

"I'm stoked," said Eric Sinkovec, store manager of Buckle, which opened last month near the mall's food court. "With some of the stores in the mall and what we have to offer, I think we're going to do real well."

Mr. Sinkovec said the new Annapolis store is part of Buckle's foray into the East Coast market, adding that another store recently opened up at Towson Town Center in Baltimore County. There also is a location at the King of Prussia mall in Pennsylvania, he said.

Stocked with laid-back West Coast and East Coast clothing, the store offers exclusive Lucky Brand and Guess jeans as well as free alterations, layaways and fittings for a diverse age group.

"We cater to the 23- to 25-year-old, but a mom could come in with her 15-year-old daughter and still shop," Mr. Sinkovec said.

Working inside the new store wearing a silver earring, Buckle's BKE in-house brand jeans and a black shirt on a recent morning, manager trainee M.J. Carroll talked about the store's appeal.

"You've got a customer service standpoint at Buckle you won't find anywhere else and you've got the brands, which speak for themselves," he said.

Strong demand

Kimberly Gussow, store manager of Swarovski, said the new store carries everything from \$55 earrings to \$4,000 crystal objects in the shape of swans. There has already been a strong demand for the store, she said.

"In the week that we've been here, I've had a lot of people come here and say, 'Great, I don't have to go to Tysons Corner anymore,' " she said.

Sheila Laderberg, a founder of Punk's Backyard Grill who will be a manager at the new flagship restaurant, said Annapolis is a "fantastic market." The opportunity to partner with Westfield for its flagship store also was a deciding factor in the company's lease.

"There was mutual interest," she said.

Ms. Laderberg also said part of the company's concept is centered around its connection to the community.

"Annapolis is a vibrant community it gave us the opportunity where we could make that connection," she said.

In other mall news, the parking lots directly in front of and next to JCPenney at the Annapolis mall have been temporarily blocked off as the department store expands with a 40,000-square-foot addition, according to mall officials.

Mr. deGraffenreid said the mall recently began work to add a third level to the parking garage next to JCPenney. To provide parking spaces that will be lost as JCPenney expands, work on an existing parking deck in front of the department store is underway, he said.

Tim Lyons, spokesman for JCPenney, said construction on the 40,000-square-foot addition began in March and will be wrapped up by March 2009. The store will get a facelift with a new layout, lighting and carpet, he said.

"We really feel like the market will support the additional space and additional merchandise," he said. "We have an opportunity to grow our business there."

Confidence in area

Bob Burdon, president and chief executive officer of the Annapolis and Anne Arundel County Chamber of Commerce, said the new stores show a "level of confidence" that retailers have in the local marketplace.

They also act as a "catalyst" for the downtown business community to get organized and take a look at how they can benefit from merchandising the area to fend off competition from the mall, he said.

Jessica Jordan, president of the Annapolis Business Association, said the new mall stores are a great sign for retail in this area in general. But she said she doesn't believe the mall poses a threat to the downtown district. City merchants target consumers seeking specialty items, she said.

And downtown is adding stores of its own. A store called lululemon athletica opened Saturday at 217 Main St., offering yoga-inspired athletic apparel and complementary yoga classes on Saturday mornings, will provide a service that local residents can use, Ms. Jordan said. "They can walk to their yoga instead of driving somewhere for it," she said.

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