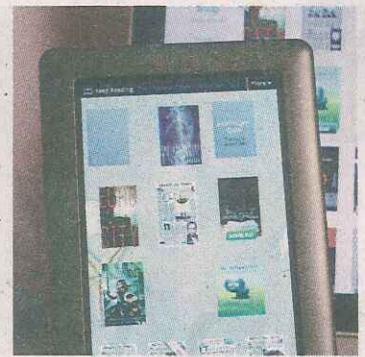


BUSINESS

A BETTER E-BOOK

TECHNOLOGY The Nookcolor a huge improvement over original D-2

OBITUARIES Area passings D-6



BOB SELF/The Times-Union

An aerial photo of St. Johns Town Center shows its more-than-a-mile stretch of restaurants and stores. The center is a mix of places like Ross Dress for Less and Louis Vuitton; McDonald's and Capital Grille. It attracts 10 million annual visitors from as far as South Georgia and Daytona Beach.

'A PERFECT STORM'

Just five years old and offering everything from Target to Tiffany's, **St. Johns Town Center** has transformed the First Coast retail landscape and become one of the most successful outdoor retail malls in the country

ST. JOHNS TOWN CENTER

200
Stores

30
Restaurants

100%
Occupancy

(A few vacancies at Markets of St. Johns Town Center)

10
MILLION
annual visitors,
according to
shopping center
management

By **ROGER BULL**
The Times-Union

The Christmas lights are up, the music's playing and the Christmas shoppers are out at St. Johns Town Center. But that's nothing new.

Since it opened five years ago, St. Johns Town Center and its two adjacent shopping areas have dominated Jacksonville's retail scene.

The stores and restaurants stretch out for more than a mile along Town Center Parkway, from Publix on the east to CVS on the west. In between, there's a Dollar Tree where everything's \$1 and a Louis Vuitton where nothing is.

It's an improbable mix of Target and a Tiffany's that opens Friday, of drive-through burger chains and valet parking before a lobster dinner.

While its success has been unquestioned, changing the face of Jacksonville shopping, bringing new stores and creating jobs, Town Center has also taken a toll elsewhere. Several of its businesses have been drawn from other shopping centers, leaving vacant storefronts and reduced traffic after key tenants moved to the next big thing.

The Town Center, along with the Markets at St. Johns Town Center and the Boutiques of St. Johns Town Center, now sits at close to 200 stores and several dozen places to eat. It draws about 10 million



DON BURK/The Times-Union

Shoppers stop to consult a brochure while spending some time at St. Johns Town Center. The shopping center has nearly 200 stores and 30 restaurants.

TOWN CENTER continues on D-5

Town Center

Continued from D-1

visitors a year, according to its management, with many coming greater distances than the developers originally expected.

Shopping center operators use the term "trade area" to designate where 80 percent of their customers are going to come from. For the Town Center, it was Nassau County to St. Augustine, from the Atlantic Ocean to the west side of Jacksonville, said Tom Schneider, executive vice president of Simon Property Group, which operates the center.

But it turns out that only 65 percent comes from there. The other 35 percent comes from much farther: Gainesville, Tallahassee, Daytona Beach, South Georgia.

"If you want to shop at Louis Vuitton," said Sal Saldana, the Town Center manager, "you have to go Atlanta or Orlando, or the Town Center."

Ben Carter, the Atlanta developer who started the whole project, said that the Town Center's restaurants are doing \$1,000 a square foot in annual revenue, placing them in the top 3 percent in the nation.

Consider that restaurant/clubs Whisky River, BlackFinn American Saloon and Suite are all located together in Epicenter, a much bigger Landing-like complex in downtown Charlotte.

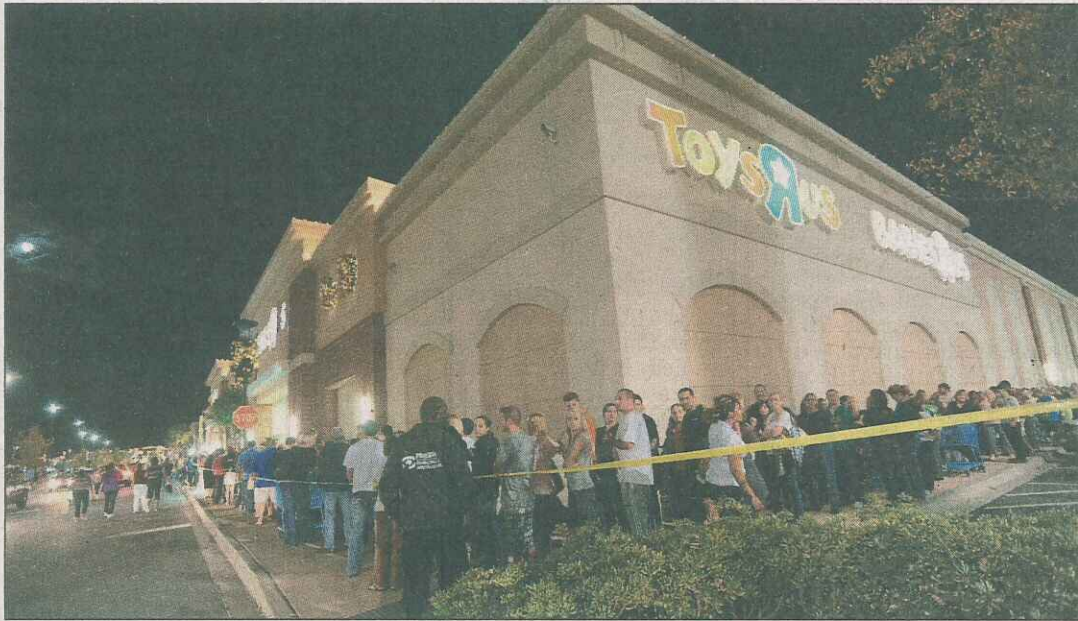
But when its developers there decided to open the three clubs in Jacksonville, they didn't go to the Landing, they didn't go downtown. They went to the Markets at Town Center.

Along the way, Jacksonville stores shut their doors and moved there, often leaving storefronts that still remain unoccupied.

Toys R Us closed its stores near the Regency and Avenues malls to open one at the Town Center, the first in the chain that combined with Babies R Us. The Regency store still stands empty, as does the Barnes & Noble after it shut and moved to Town Center.

The space West Marine left on University Boulevard to move to the Town Center still stands empty. Down on Southside Boulevard, the old CompUSA is now empty with a sign announcing that it's moved ... to the Town Center.

Jay Jabour moved his Karl's



BOB MACK/The Times-Union

Several thousand shoppers wait for Black Friday shopping at St. Johns Town Center.

Clothier from San Marco to the Town Center in April because, "Eventually, everyone comes here. To shop, for dinner, they come to the Town Center."

Paul Mason, professor of economics and geography at the University of North Florida, said all the business that comes there has to come at the expense of other retailers.

"People aren't going to spend more just because the Town Center is there," he said.

And Schneider called it one of the most successful outdoor malls in the country.

"Clearly the location is very important," Schneider said. "But I think the timing was good. We got it leased before the world came to an end."

Mark Rubin, a Jacksonville developer, called it "A perfect storm. Locating it at the time of the Butler and 9A intersection was a stroke of genius."

It seems like a central location now, a no-brainer. But for years nothing but pine trees stood in a no man's between the Southside and the Beaches.

Carter said he'd been coming to Ponte Vedra Beach for 30 years and always keeping an eye on the Jacksonville market. In 1996, after Florida 9A had been announced but not funded, he met with the Skinner family, which owned much of the Southside after decades of timber, turpentine, then dairy and finally development.

Three years later, after the road was funded, he went back and they talked again. He signed the contract for 200 acres in 2000. Construction began in 2003 and two years later, St. Johns Town Center

opened.

The design

Though the template for shopping centers has been an enclosed mall for decades, the Town Center developers went a different direction and left the roof off. Though some of it is a series of strip centers, a main street was created, lined with stores, angle parking, benches and plants that gives more the feel of city than shopping center.

Carter said it fits particularly well in Jacksonville, with its Florida weather and a younger demographic that thinks more urban than suburban.

"A lot of the great shopping districts around the world are on streets," he said.

And it's worked so well that Carter said his company plans to develop only open air centers for awhile.

Barton Weitz knows the Town Center well, but not through his position as eminent scholar chair of retail management at the University of Florida.

"My wife just likes to shop there," he said. "What pulls you in as a shopper is that all things are in one place. And it's reminiscent of old shopping downtown. They've created this atmosphere where you can walk around and feel like you're downtown."

Weitz said that is the wave of the future. Only one or two enclosed malls are being built each year in the U.S., while about 150 open air centers are opening.

The mix

But probably

about the Town Center was the combination of stores and restaurants that have developed there.

Carter said it was one of the first projects in the country that incorporated both the big boxes and what's called a "lifestyle center," basically meaning higher end stores.

The developers already knew the area would draw affluent shoppers. Costco was already next door and its customers have an average household income of \$75,000, with 31 percent earning more than \$100,000.

Even before Tiffany's arrived on the scene, one stretch of the center has developed into a mini Worth Avenue or Rodeo Drive, the likes of which Jacksonville hadn't seen before.

Louis Vuitton and Mayors, which sells fine watches, jewelry and pens, flank the new Tiffany's.

Erik Peterson, manager of Mayors, said that Tiffany's will increase traffic in his store.

The clientele is similar.

The Mayors in Miami recently sold a ring for \$1.3 million. The Jacksonville store doesn't top out quite there. The highest-priced item is a \$60,000 Rolex, and it sits in the vault.

Across the street, True Religion is for a bit hipper crowd. The blue jeans there start at \$172 and go up to \$374. But you can buy a T-shirt for only \$49.

Saleswoman Rebecca Sowell said their clientele is mostly in their 30s, but sometimes

they get teens with Mom's credit card.

In addition to the higher-end stores lining the street, there's the far more pedestrian Old Navy and Ross Dress for Less stretching out in the strip centers.

Carter said the selection of Target over, say, WalMart was a conscious one.

"A lot of high-end people shop at Target," Carter said. "It tends to have better apparel, more back than now. But most of the national retailers were comfortable with Target and the customers it attracts."

"As a matter of fact, Dillard's required that we have a Target."

Boutiques

Jabour had three Karl's Clothiers stores at one point, but decided that was stretching him too thin. So he closed his stores in Avondale in 2004 and at the Beaches the next year and settled into just one men's clothing store in San Marco.

But then he decided he needed a change.

"As a single store operator," he said. "You've got to be as centrally located as possible. Now we've gotten back some of Beaches customers we'd lost when we closed that store."

He's off in a wing called the The Boutiques at St. Johns Town Center North, which is owned by Ben Carter Properties with Simon's involvement. Although it's anchored by Publix and the only Total Wine & Spirits in the area, much of it is smaller, local stores like Kyds, Villa Vita and Model Citizen.

It was created, Carter said, for the local stores that couldn't afford the Town Center rent, so it's priced at \$30 a foot, about half the rest of the center.

And Jabour does feel a little bad about the neighborhood he left behind, but said it will recover.

"When you look at older areas like San Marco and Avondale," they've been through this before. I'm sure San Marco went through it years ago when Regency opened, that same sucking sound.

"But it always comes back, because it's a neighborhood."

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