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## Brighter days at Medley Centre?

### Bon-Ton exit clouds mall's future, but hope is rekindled as a new owner takes over

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Go window shopping at Medley Centre in Irondequoit and the window might be empty.

Darkened storefronts, many with the store name and logo still displayed, provide a partial directory of the businesses that once called the mall home.

Aeropostale. Carlton Cards. Belden Jewelers. Designer Deals. Fanny Farmer. Lane Bryant. The Limited. Original Cookie Company. Ruby Tuesday. S&K Menswear. Subway. Victoria's Secret. Waldenbooks. Wilson Leathers.

Next month, Bon-Ton will join that list. The closing of the department store because of weak sales will leave only Sears and Macy's as anchors of a mall that will have 39 tenants — compared with 103 when the mall opened in 1990 and fewer even than the 46 operating at Midtown Plaza.

As Medley Centre merchants and shoppers voiced concerns last week about how the mall would survive the loss of an anchor, the shopping center was sold, the third time it has changed hands.

Developer Adam Bersin, the owner since May 2005, said he had sold the 900,000-square-foot mall to Scott R. Congel, a principal with The Pyramid Cos., a Syracuse-based mall development company where Bersin formerly worked. The price wasn't disclosed.

The deal includes the soon-to-be-vacant Bon-Ton store as well as land surrounding the mall that Bersin purchased last year for \$4.7 million. That property will be developed in conjunction with improvements at Medley Centre, Bersin said, but he wouldn't elaborate and Congel hasn't responded to interview requests.

Bersin, who will remain involved in the mall's management, acknowledged that a tremendous amount of work has to be done to revive Medley Centre. He suggested that Congel — part of a family-owned company that successfully operates 20 malls in the Northeast — has the financial resources to pull it off.

But even with a \$135 million loan that Congel has obtained, the question is whether his team can come up with a strategy that works.

A marketing professor at Rochester Institute of Technology said the size of Congel's credit line indicates that the Pyramid executive is thinking of more than just retail. Professor Eugene Fram said the developer might be leaning toward a mixed-use project that would include housing, offices, restaurants and entertainment.

Whatever is being contemplated has to be creative, Fram said. "They need to go outside of the big box."

#### **Wanted: unique stores**

Destination retailers, which are unique to a market and attract shoppers from considerable distances, could boost Medley Centre. Steve & Barry's University Sportswear, which Bersin brought to Medley Centre and the Rochester market in 2005, is one such retailer. But Steve & Barry's can be entered from the mall's exterior, and too few shoppers go from the store into the mall itself. Another example of a destination retailer is Bass Pro Shops, the national sporting goods and outdoors company, which typically draws shoppers from 100 miles away. But there already is a Bass Pro in Cayuga County and another planned for Buffalo, bracketing the Rochester market on the east and west.

Fram said that many of the vacant storefronts in Medley Centre could be converted to office space with a minimal amount of reconstruction. Adding a movie theater or banquet facility is another possibility, he said.

The mall just needs more stores, Alexis Bryant said during a recent visit to shop at Macy's.

"This mall would be OK if it had more stores like the other malls," said the 21-year-old student at Monroe Community College. "That's probably why more people don't come here."

Bryant said she would like to see stores such as Burlington Coat Factory, Aeropostale, Victoria's Secret and Gazooks at Medley Centre — naming some of the very retailers that have departed.

Sue Stephens, owner of Mythic Treasures, a gift shop at the mall featuring mythology and magic, said that trying to fill Medley Centre with retail could be difficult.

"I think mixed-use would be cool and different," she said, suggesting a gym, a doctor's office or a library branch.

Stephens moved to the Irondequoit center four years ago from Village Gate in Rochester, drawn by a rent she considered reasonable and a desire to be part of the mall's comeback.

She described her first Christmas season as good, but said business declined as nearby stores left. The corridor in which Mythic Treasures is located was filled with other stores when she arrived. Now it's empty of retailers, except for Sears.

Stephens laid off three employees, replacing them with family members.

"I'm scraping by," she said. "I make enough to pay the bills, but I can't hire employees back."

Jim Frascati, an owner of Irondequoit Travel at Medley Centre, remains upbeat about his business and the mall's prospects. He would love to see the empty storefronts fill up, but said that will take time. "It takes businesses willing to take a chance. The opportunity and space is here. It can only get better."

### **80,000 at opening**

Irondequoit Mall opened in March 1990. The \$80 million center was the first two-level suburban mall in the region, featuring skylights and a center court fountain that shot water 20 feet into the air. During the first weekend, 80,000 visitors came and spent \$4 million.

The mall was expected to draw residents from across the region. For a while it did. But then Wilmorite Inc., developer of Irondequoit Mall, renovated two other shopping complexes it managed. Wilmorite built a 318,000-square-foot connection between its Greece Ridge Center and Long Ridge Mall in Greece, increasing what is now The Mall at Greece Ridge to 1.6 million square feet.

Next, Eastview Mall in Victor was renovated and expanded to 1.3 million square feet. The project not only surpassed the Irondequoit center in size but also in high-end tenants such as Lord & Taylor and Williams-Sonoma.

Wilmorite said the improvements in Greece and Victor were needed to keep those properties viable. But they also may have had the effect of making Irondequoit comparatively less attractive.

Wilmorite officials said they thought Irondequoit would bounce back. Instead, occupancy rates declined and, nearly 11 years after opening, Wilmorite was gone.

Fram, the marketing professor, said Wilmorite "obviously made a poor decision" in building Irondequoit Mall in the first place. "Wilmorite must have overestimated the potential attractiveness of the mall."

Bersin, however, continues to insist that the mall is in an ideal location, easily visible and accessible from Route 104.

Bersin was greeted enthusiastically when he bought the mall two years ago. He added Steve & Barry's in the fall of 2005 and attracted a free-standing Target store, adjacent to the mall, a year later.

Since then, no other retailers have come.

### **Decline in sales**

Rakesh Marwah has operated New York Trendz, an urban wear store at the mall, for eight years. Like other shoppers and merchants, he bemoans the loss of Bon-Ton, foreseeing yet another drop in customers.

While the additions of Steve & Barry's and Target have been welcomed, Marwah said neither has generated the hoped-for shopper traffic for mall stores such as his. "My clients know I'm here. But with no new foot traffic coming in, my sales go down some every year."

Sisters Joyce Foos, Doris Wagner and Kathy Wagner Hill recently visited Medley Centre to shop at Bon-Ton's pre-closing sale. The siblings remember when the mall opened, bustling with shoppers.

Foos, 54, a Spencerport resident who works for BOCES 2, said that back then the mall had a lot of variety and good crowds. "It's sad and disappointing that the mall can't keep an anchor and other little shops," she said.

Wagner, a 52-year-old nurse in Brighton, and Wagner Hill, 48, a university professor now living in Chevy Chase, Md., remember the mall as lively and vibrant.

For Medley Centre to come back, Wagner Hill suggested the addition of several businesses not found in the Rochester area: Trader Joe's, a discount gourmet grocery chain; the Swedish retailer IKEA; and World Market, a home décor retailer.

"If we could attract some stores like that, I think there's hope in reviving it," she said.

Marwah, owner of the urban wear store, agrees. He said the mall needs a new concept, a new business that will be an attraction.

Stephens, the owner of the mythology and magic shop, said that she would like to keep doing business at Medley Centre.

"As stores move out, I don't know how long I can afford to stay," she said.

"My customers are a loyal base. The problem is you have to get new ones when they move away."

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#### **What's at stake**

The future of one of the Rochester area's regional malls. Medley Centre will be down to two anchor stores, a destination retailer and 35 mall shops when Bon-Ton closes next month.

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