

Jewelry shop finds best of both worlds

Blanca Flor first downtown store
lured by mall recruiters

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Until last year, Annapolis business owner Donna De Garcia hadn't thought of herself as a mall person.

But in recent years, the owner of downtown landmark Blanca Flor Silver Jewelry watched the Westfield Annapolis mall emerge as an upscale mix of shops and restaurants. So when mall leasing agents approached her to open a second store inside the mall's new 240,000-square-foot wing unveiled last fall, Ms. De Garcia saw their offer as a chance to expand her client base.

"It's a big attraction and a bigger mall," said Ms. De Garcia, who also will maintain operations of her store along Market Space downtown. "My sales are doing well downtown and they're doing well here, too. So there's a market for both stores."

Blanca Flor is the first downtown shop to open at the newly expanded mall. It's one of several city and regional businesses the mall is recruiting, mall officials said.

And although some say that one merchant's expansion isn't cause for concern, some observers believe a growing migration of merchants to the mall could be problematic.

"We have our work ahead of us downtown, to market the downtown area, to merchandise it," said Bob Burdon, president and chief executive officer of the Annapolis and Anne Arundel County Chamber of Commerce.

In December, Blanca Flor opened a 900-square-foot space near the courtyard of Nordstrom and California Pizza Kitchen. The mall store, which is smaller than the downtown shop, features unique sterling silver jewelry priced from \$6 to \$800, including the Elle line that Ms. De Garcia describes as classic and timeless. Friday and yesterday, Blanca Flor celebrated its grand opening at the mall, featuring a

fashion show and runway models.

Mall Marketing Director Scott deGraffenreid said Blanca Flor is a "great addition to our tenant mix." The mall also has had discussions with other businesses in the city and throughout the region, he said.

"We have so many great operators around us, so many great concepts in this area and a lot of them would do very well in a shopping center environment," he said.

Ms. De Garcia said she felt her store could fill a niche at the mall, and operating stores between the mall and downtown was manageable, she said. Ms. De Garcia declined to provide exact figures, but she expects her mall store to bring in just as much, or more, sales volume as her downtown store.

Blanca Flor is opening at a time when retail options are growing in suburban areas across the country. In Annapolis, the \$400 million Annapolis Towne Centre at Parole complex is set to open in October. Last fall, the mall unveiled its more than \$100 million expansion and 60 new specialty shops.

In response to growing retail options, city merchants have focused on programs to market their locally owned shops, where customers can talk directly to the owner. Several downtown advocates said they believe Blanca Flor's mall opening is a good opportunity for Ms. De Garcia and don't think it will lead to a trend.

"I think we have a lot to talk about in a positive way about downtown Annapolis," said Clare Vanderbeek, executive director of the Annapolis Business Association. "It's a different shopper than the mall shopper."

Mike Miron, director of the city's Department of Economic Affairs, said he's aware the mall has been trying to recruit downtown businesses, but added that not every city merchant would make a good fit there.

"If it's just one business going out there, I don't think it's a problem," he said.

Bill Greenfield, a leasing agent with Hyatt Commercial who helped put Blanca Flor in its current location at Market Space, said the situation harkens back to a similar scenario decades ago. He said his family, who owned Peerless Clothing, a downtown business, as well as other city merchants were "criticized" when they opened additional stores at the old Parole Plaza. That plaza is now being redeveloped as Annapolis Towne Centre at Parole.

Everyone was worried the openings would take business from downtown, he said,

adding that "of course, that didn't happen."

At one point, the mall's former owners began leasing to independent businesses, but later decided to concentrate on national tenants, feeling it was "better for their image and their portfolio," Mr. Greenfield said.

Jessica Jordan, president of the Annapolis Business Association and owner of upscale boutique Paradigm on Main Street, said if anything, the mall's effort to recruit downtown firms is a "telltale" sign that Westfield isn't able to recruit some of the national chains "as well as they thought they could."

But Dr. Eugene Fram, marketing professor at the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York, said the larger question is whether outside developments as a whole will hurt the downtown area, as they have in Rochester. The city now is trying to revive itself with a new office complex that will house the headquarters for a communications company and a bank, and the hope is that retail stores will follow, he said.

Mr. Burdon said he wouldn't be surprised if other city merchants move to the mall, and added that Blanca Flor's new location is a "warning sign" to create a "flavor" and "experience" downtown with initiatives such as the flower program and the Main Street program. "It needs to transition into a more viable experience for consumers," he said.

Blanca Flor is named after the estate where the grandparents of Ms. De Garcia's ex-husband lived on the Yucatan peninsula in Mexico. It has gained a regional reputation for its sterling silver jewelry. The couple, who formerly imported jewelry from Mexico and sold high-fashion jewelry to upscale stores such as Nordstrom, opened their first store in 1993 on Main Street and later moved it to Market Space in 1998.

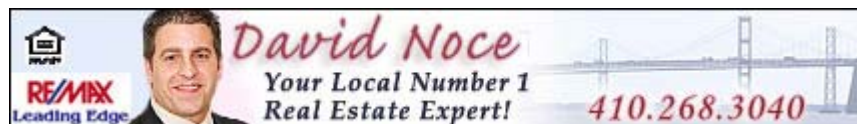
They expanded with stores in Alexandria, Bethesda and Georgetown, but later closed the less-profitable and hard-to-manage Virginia and Washington stores, Ms. De Garcia said. Rigel De Garcia still operates the Bethesda shop.

The new mall location will focus on customers who wouldn't normally go downtown and customers like the Severna Park mom who already is at the mall with her teenager children, Ms. De Garcia said. Meanwhile, she is getting used to the mall atmosphere, adding that she likes to visit the Nordstrom cafe and go to McCormick & Schmick's restaurant.

"I'm enjoying being here some," she said.

- No Jumps-

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