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How Westport Village's new owners plan to liven things up

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Kelly Brown calls Westport Village a unique shopping district in Louisville's many shopping options.

She also knows that the retail center has seen its fair share of trouble in recent years.

Brown is marketing director for Westport Village for Atlanta-based Hendon Properties LLC, which bought the property last spring. In that role, she's part of the team that is working to overcome problems caused by a dispute between past management and tenants.

Brown has launched a new marketing strategy, and she's in the process of reviving past events and finding focus for the retail center.

Hendon bought Westport Village in May, in the midst of a legal battle between the prior owner, Camelot Acquisition LLC, and more than 20 Westport Village tenants. The tenants also had complaints about Inland American Retail Management LLC, the management company hired by Camelot.

The tenants were unhappy with Camelot and sued the company, saying it had overcharged them for operating expenses and real estate taxes. (More on that here.)

Allison Carothers, the owner of Summer Classics, said those were difficult days.

Carothers said sometimes shoppers would come into her furniture store in Westport Village just to ask about the lawsuit.

She said her business is all about creating a positive customer experience, but she watched the buzz about Westport Village turn from positive to negative with the lawsuit.

"It just wasn't the talked-about buzz center that it once was," she said.

Carothers is happy to see the new management company is turning it around as promised.

She noticed that Hendon has invested in security cameras, which tenants had requested, and that the company is bringing back events that energize the shopping center and engage customers.



WILLIAM DESHAZER

Summer Classics is hosting one of those revived events — a Kentucky Derby fashion show — in March, and Carothers said there's more coming.

Brown describes Hendon as a company that is driven by "Southern hospitality."

The company is focused on bringing in local retailers, restaurants and businesses that reflect and fit with the vibe of the shopping center. She said Hendon is marketing the shopping center as an experience — something you can't get while shopping online.

"We are more of an experience," Brown said. "Westport Village is set up so we can be more nimble. We aren't dependent on a Macy's, and when we do events, everyone jumps on board."

Along with the Derby fashion show, this year Hendon also will resurrect a summer concert series, an Oktoberfest celebration and a Christmas lights display.

Brown said that when Hendon took over Westport Village, the shopping center was 27 percent vacant, with 45,522 square feet of empty space open out of its total 168,981 square feet. Now Westport is only 6.2 percent vacant, with 10,478 square feet of empty space.

During the last year, Tunies LLC and Darling State of Mind LLC (both women's clothing stores) have opened, as well as Coffee Zone. Another tenant, Louisville Tile Distributors Inc., is expanding its space in the shopping center, and Bliss Home will open later this spring, replacing Gattiland pizza.

Brown also was excited to say that the company recently signed a new tenant: Wag N' Wash, a pet grooming business with a pet treat bakery.

The new marketing efforts launched in January, with Valentine's Day being the first big test.

It seems to be working.

Brown said that Oberer's Flowers tripled its Valentine's flower sales this year compared with last year. She said Clater Jewelers Diamond Center's owner told her that her staff saw a lot of "new, young men" come in to buy jewelry for the holiday.

"My main goal is just to continue to make this a shopping and eating destination for Louisville shoppers," Brown said.

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