

Leasing Momentum on Point at Boston Retail Center Despite Economy

LEGACY PLACE in Dedham, Massachusetts, one of only two major shopping centers to open in the United States last year, is 93 percent leased and 85 percent occupied, despite last year's retail economy. While many projects stalled, developers were able to complete Legacy Place on time because of early leasing momentum and a fast-track construction schedule, says Brian Sciera, project manager and vice president of lifestyle centers for WS Development, a retail developer based in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts.

Built on 47 acres (19 ha) that previously housed a movie theater and an underused parking lot, the \$200 million project, financed by Sovereign Bank, is the first lifestyle center inside Boston's Route 128 beltway. The location, a densely populated area largely defined by strip malls and big-box stores, provided an opportunity for urban, street-inspired design and eclectic retail and entertainment tenants. From wide sidewalks and six architecturally distinct buildings to a mix of local and national retailers and restaurants, the concept centered on creating a day/evening destination, upscale but not exclusive, that transcended the strip mall experience. "With the type of fashion, restaurants, and entertainment tenants we have at Legacy Place, we're bringing the energy of the city to the suburbs," explains Sciera. "We feel that we're creating a new urban-suburban experience."

The idea behind the project originated in 2003, when Norwood, Massachusetts-based National Amusements approached WS Development about unlocking the potential of its cinema site, which stood underused at the crossroads of two major thoroughfares, Interstate 95 and Route 1. Cambridge-based architect Prellwitz



Legacy Place in Dedham, outside Boston, one of only two major shopping centers to open in the United States last year, has an urban, street-inspired design, in contrast with surrounding strip malls and big-box stores.

Chilinski Associates (PCA) Inc. was selected to design a retail destination with a 15-screen theater that would attract customers with unique amenities and design character while complementing Dedham's existing business district and architectural history.

"Retail design is more than designing nice storefronts in a populated area," notes PCA design director Wendy Prellwitz. "It's about connecting people to the things they need, to other people in their lives, and the feel of retail neighborhoods. Creating success for Legacy's tenants was the goal, yet fundamentally, creating a great place to be creates a great place to shop." The design team took cues from various New England town centers and urban public spaces. Storefronts face out to wide landscaped sidewalks, many with outdoor cafés. The larger buildings incorporate varied architecture and traditional building materials that evoke a place that grew over time.

The leasing effort paralleled the design strategy, targeting a mix of shops and amenities that would transcend standard retail offerings to bring visitors back to the site. National Amusements, with its flagship

cinema, provided a foundation. Next, the team lined up retailers Whole Foods Market and LL Bean. Securing these anchors early proved a turning point, propelling leasing momentum before the economy weakened, says Sciera.

Still, the project faced major challenges. Despite its potential to spark job growth and economic activity, the new development's impact on traffic and local businesses worried some Dedham officials and residents. In response, the developer recruited tenants that would complement, not threaten, local businesses, and introduced new entertainment options to Dedham, such as a Kings bowling alley.

Less than a year after opening, sales figures for the retailers have exceeded expectations. Leasing momentum continues, with Yard House and Williams-Sonoma opening in March and Borders slated to open this summer, along with local favorites like Boston ice cream maker J.P. Licks.

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