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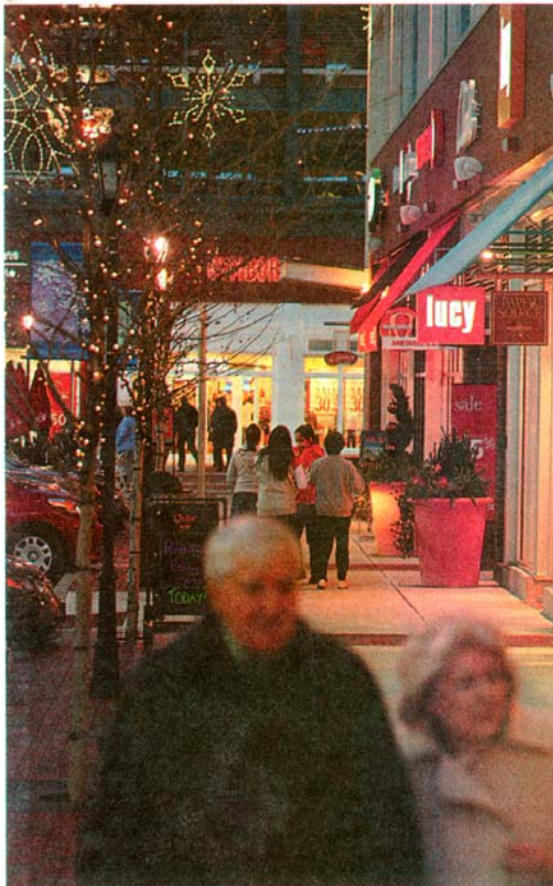
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A new spin on retail



PHOTOS BY ESSDRAS M SUAREZ/GLOBE STAFF

NEW APPROACH-OLD APPROACH A mix of stores, restaurants, and entertainment venues is attracting shoppers to Legacy Place (left), an open-air lifestyle center that opened in Dedham in August. But the operator of South Shore Plaza (right) says anchor tenants such as Macy's mean the Braintree mall continues to be a destination for consumers.

Legacy Place uses attractions to defy the odds during a downturn

By Jenn Abelson
GLOBE STAFF

DEDHAM — By 8:30 a.m. on the day after Thanksgiving, when the frenzy of Black Friday besieged other malls, Legacy Place was deserted. But the managers at this new shopping center insisted they weren't worried as sheets of rain fell across the empty parking lot.

Hours later, shoppers packed the open-air plaza off Route 1, streaming into Showcase Cinema de Lux to catch new releases such as "The Twilight Saga: New Moon," tearing up the alleys at Kings bowling, gorging on sweets at Sugar Heaven, and hitting the sales at various merchants. While traffic dropped off at other retail outlets after Black Friday, Legacy Place was bustling for the rest of the post-Thanksgiving weekend.

This holiday, Legacy Place is changing the shopping landscape in Massachusetts by spurning such traditional gimmicks as door-buster deals at the break of dawn and photos with Santa. Instead, the Dedham complex is vying to attract customers with its unique combination of entertainment, upscale restaurants such as Met Bar & Grill, New England's largest Whole Foods Market, and a range of retail options, including the first shopping venue in the state with all three Urban brands: Anthropologie, Free People, and Urban Outfitters.

Open-air shopping meccas such as Legacy Place have gained huge popularity across the country as consumers demand more from their shopping excursions. The number of lifestyle centers, which typically offer specialty merchants along with restaurants and entertainment with easy pedestrian access, has doubled to 434 since 2003. Meanwhile, no new enclosed mall has opened in the United States since 2006. In Massachusetts, about a half-dozen open-air shopping centers similar to Legacy Place have opened since 2003, including Derby Street Shoppes in Hingham and Patriot Place in Foxborough, according to Robert F. Sheehan, vice president of research

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In new mall approach, attractions are key

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for KeyPoint Partners LLC, a Burlington firm.

Legacy Place has become one of the rare bright spots in retail since opening in August in the midst of the worst recession in decades. Many of the 60 merchants here say they are selling well beyond their projections for the first few months — some by as much as 30 percent, although managers of Legacy Place won't disclose traffic numbers.

And the center, which was in the works since 2004, is now poaching some customers from struggling malls like Natick Collection and even from strong venues such as South Shore Plaza in Braintree. At a time when some outlets, including the Westgate Mall in Brockton, are in deep financial trouble, and consumers are being thrifty with their dollars, Legacy is pulling them in.

"As shopping centers go, this is a very exciting place to be because it changes the equation of what the shoppers are used to seeing in this market," Sheehan said. "It's the first time Boston area shoppers are able to experience high-quality fashion in an outdoor venue with entertainment and dining. You're seeing a lot of sales diverted from other shopping centers."

While there is no data to gauge sales at various local shopping centers, foot traffic in Dedham Square is down, with some merchants already reporting losses of up to 50 percent since Legacy Place opened.

Analysts say Legacy Place is benefiting from the bump of being new and filling a void at a busy crossroads, near the intersections of Routes 1 and 128. Even during the blustery weather over the past two weeks, customers at Legacy Place said they preferred the fresh air and easy access to stores over stuffy malls filled with throngs of teenagers and less-convenient parking.

Elizabeth Keefe, of Westwood, stopped by the center recently to pick up winter boots for her 6-year-old daughter, Katherine, at Collections by Stride Rite. It was a Monday night, but the



JOANNE RATHE/GLOBE STAFF

Owen McCafferty, 5, of Dedham, recently bowled a string at Kings, one of the entertainment options drawing people to Legacy Place. Open-air shopping centers have gained popularity. No new enclosed malls have opened in the United States since 2006.

shoe store was jam-packed, as though it were a weekend. Legacy Place has become Keefe's new retail center of choice for back-to-school shopping, everyday needs, and holiday gifts.

"Normally, I go to South Shore Plaza, but I haven't been since Legacy Place opened," Keefe said. "Everything we used to have to go to the mall for is now right here. It's much easier." Traditional mall owners, however, dismiss the suggestion that they may have fallen out of favor.

Simon Malls, which runs South Shore Plaza, declined to provide specifics on sales at the Braintree center, but said traffic is comparable to last year.

Laurel Sibert, a Simon spokeswoman, acknowledged that the mall has many of the same tenants as Legacy Place, in-

cluding the Gap, Banana Republic, Victoria's Secret, and Gymboree. But she added that the mall features anchor tenants that Legacy does not have, such as Macy's, and will expand its appeal with the opening of a Nordstrom and a Target next year.

"Regional shopping centers like South Shore are such dominant players because they have destination stores and department stores," Sibert said. "Shopping plazas are a staple of American life."

David Keating, a spokesman for General Growth Properties, the struggling mall operator that runs Natick Collection, declined to comment on Legacy Place specifically, but said: "Competition makes all the players in the market stay one step ahead in always providing the best in retail and entertainment."

But Madison Riley, a retail analyst with Kurt Salmon Associates in Boston, said the success of Legacy Place, particularly during a recession, suggests that other shopping centers are feeling the pain.

Independence Mall in Kingstons has struggled to attract tenants with the recession and recent opening of nearby Colony Place, a vast new open-air shopping center with more restaurants, convenient parking, and specialized shops. In the fall, Independence Mall lost another one of its big tenants, Old Navy, which built a new location at Colony Place.

"We do not have an expanding economy right now — so retail is a zero-sum game — what one mall takes, another loses," Riley said.

In Dedham, Legacy Place is

now drawing regular customers from a distance, like Brisbane Vaillancourt, 26, of Sharon, who does her weekly food shopping at Whole Foods instead of supermarkets closer to home.

"I like the atmosphere here," Vaillancourt said. "I can get my groceries and do some shopping, too."

Retail chains are touting Legacy Place as well. Local merchant Stellabella Toys says its shop at the complex has quickly become its best performer, with sales that are 33 percent ahead of expectations. Cheap chic merchant H&M, which has stores at Legacy Place and South Shore Plaza, would not provide sales comparisons but said the chain has had "an outstanding response from the local customers" in Dedham. And Sugar Heaven is getting more custom-

ers than at its former Newbury Street spot.

But not all open-air malls have enjoyed instant success.

At Patriot Place, adjacent to Gillette Stadium in Foxborough, the operators of the outdoor complex are still figuring out the right tenant mix since opening with outdoor emporium Bass Pro Shops in 2007. Traffic is up 12 percent compared with last year, but shoppers, retail analysts, and several trips to the center revealed few crowds during the weekdays and multiple vacan-

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MADISON RILEY
retail analyst,
Kurt Salmon Associates

To improve its prospects, Patriot Place is increasingly focusing on the entertainment offerings, along with free family events and a new ice skating rink that opened earlier this month.

Brian Earley, general manager of Patriot Place, said the business has not seen any noticeable effects from the launch of its Dedham rival, and the two centers together are helping to transform the retail environment.

"It's not all about shopping. It's about a family experience," Earley said. "It's not running to the mall to a specific retailer. It's about coming down and spending the day and creating a destination."

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