

Old Macy's leased to Korean discount store

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LAWRENCEVILLE — A South Korean department store making its first entry into the U.S. market will be filling the vacant Macy's space at Gwinnett Place Mall.

Developer George Thorndyke, who owns the space, said Wednesday that Korean Mega Mart — known as M — should be ready to open in February 2009.

Thorndyke said the new store will be much like Macy's, which moved to a new location in the mall four years ago, leaving its old space empty. In addition to clothing, handbags and cosmetics, Thorndyke said Mega Mart will also have an electronics hall and a grocery store that includes exotic foods, tasting stations and ready-to-eat dishes.

"It's kind of new for America, but after seeing it, I believe it is something that will catch on," Thorndyke said.

The developer said Mega Mart is the only tenant he tried to put in the store and that he has been pursuing a deal with the company for a year and a half. Thorndyke said he visited five of the company's stores on a trip to South Korea; the company has 12 Korean stores and three in China.

The Gwinnett Place store will serve as a test for the United States, Thorndyke said, and the company will look to expand in five other cities if the move goes well. A second Atlanta location is also being considered.

Joe Allen, the director of the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District, said he thinks the store's addition will enhance the shopping experience at the mall.

"I think it will have a very positive impact," Allen said. "It's great to see that location filled with retail once again."

Other international businesses are coming to the Gwinnett Place area, including a number of shops and restaurants in the nearby Gwinnett Prado and

Gwinnett Station shopping centers. There, developer Ly Phillips said she wants to transform the area into one much like Buford Highway.

In a survey sponsored by the CID and released Wednesday, 8 percent of Gwinnett residents said the area's cultural diversity is its greatest strength. An additional 28 percent of residents said more and larger culturally diverse stores would entice them to shop in the district.

Thorndyke said he is counting on the store's success to cement Gwinnett's reputation as a draw for people of all cultures.

"Atlanta is not a city that people from all over the world come to, but for some reason, Gwinnett County has become that," he said. "If Gwinnett does it right, we can truly become an international city."

Mega Mart will have a 15-year lease, with the option of renewing for another 15 years, and 150 employees. Thorndyke said renovations to the 240,000-square-foot storefront are already underway, and will include changing the look of the building's entrances and allowing access directly to the store's third floor.

A statement from Simon Properties, the mall's owner, called Mega Mart a "fresh and unique" experience and said the company is looking forward to welcoming the development.

"We believe the addition will serve as yet another positive change taking place at Gwinnett Place Mall to bring even more choices to our shoppers," the statement said.

Thorndyke said he and others hope that Mega Mart's entrance into the mall will help bring more shoppers to the area.

"It's huge," Thorndyke said. "It's going to be exciting."

Bringing the store to Gwinnett Place will not mean anything for a lawsuit Thorndyke filed a year ago regarding Gwinnett County commissioners' decision not to allow a high-rise in the mall's parking lot, he said. That suit, which is now in discovery, will continue to go forward.

CID Note:

M is not a discount store. The CID welcomes M to the greater Gwinnett Place area.