

GOODBYE, CITY CENTER

A Downtown gem when it opened in 1989, the forlorn mall will be torn down by summer. The city wants to develop the land as a park, ringed by housing, restaurants, shops and offices — all to be completed in five to 10 years.

By Marla Matzer Rose and Mike Pramik
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Columbus City Center is coming down, and Downtown as we know it is about to change.

This summer, nearly 20 years after City Center opened as the shining star of central Ohio's retail universe, the obsolete and nearly abandoned mall will be demolished. It is to be replaced by an urban park and, within several years, a collection of buildings that will contain homes, offices, restaurants and shops.

The city has dubbed the \$165 million project Columbus Commons. It is seeking federal stimulus money to pay for the mall demolition and development of the park, which city officials expect to start this summer and complete within 18 months. The remainder of the project will take shape over the next five to 10 years, as the market dictates.

While the timing of the development is somewhat fluid, the plan is now clear.

"In my opinion, City Center was built to fail," said Mayor Michael B. Coleman. "But now, the potential and opportunity for this site to be the jewel of the city of Columbus is there."

Coleman calls Columbus Commons a critical component of the \$280 million revitalization planned for River-South, an area that covers the southwestern part of Downtown.

City Center will close March 5, said Guy Worley, chief executive of Capitol South Urban Redevelopment Corp., a nonprofit group that was created in the 1970s to develop the area around the mall and that took ownership of City Center more than a year ago.

Since 2007, the number of tenants at City Center has dropped steadily. Today, it includes three fast-food restaurants, two dance studios that are open irregular hours and a luggage store that promotes a going-out-of-business sale. The remaining eight tenants were given 30 days' notice late yesterday.

All that will be left are the parking garage, underground parking and the entryway to the mall off State Street.

The most controversial part of Columbus Commons could be destruction of the mall. While clearly past its prime, the mall is structurally sound and cost \$116 million to build.

Coleman said he and Capitol South spoke with dozens of developers who pitched ideas for renovating the mall, but none was deemed viable. Worley said that consultants estimated the cost to reconfigure it into offices and other uses would be a sky-high \$250 per square foot.

"You can build new for less than that," Worley said.

Retailers also said thanks, but no thanks, for a variety of reasons. That left two options: Leave it empty, or tear it down and start over.

"We certainly didn't start out this whole City Center endeavor anticipating that we would be in a demolition and park-building mode," said Thomas E. Hoaglin, Capitol South's chairman. "We were unable to attract any reasonable offer for the property and, in this climate, it quickly became apparent that the possibilities of redevelopment were going to be zero."

Jack Kessler, a Capitol South board member and chairman of the New Albany Co., agreed that starting from scratch became the only viable option. For one thing, "It's costing us a lot of money to keep open every month," Kessler said. Worley declined to specify upkeep costs but called them "excessive" after catching himself from saying "astronomical."

"That's the heart of the Downtown," Kessler added. "To have a great, big, empty building down there isn't good for anyone."

After working for several months with Nationwide Realty, Capitol South enlisted Georgetown Co. as development manager for City Center. Georgetown is the New York firm that co-designed Easton and assisted in the redesign of Downtown's Lazarus building.

One thought was to keep the mall and open the High Street facade to retail development. But that was going to prove too costly because City Center was built for one purpose: to be an enclosed mall.

"In stepping back, we said, 'Let's turn the page,'" said Georgetown Vice Chairman Edgar Lampert. "Most importantly, we felt it was important to establish a framework for future development rather than specifying exactly what that development is."

"In an urban setting, it's important to establish your street grid and establish your public spaces."

Capitol South turned to MSI, a Columbus design firm that laid out the Arena District grid and is designing the Scioto Mile, a park along the river. A plan emerged that would continue Town Street through at least a good portion of Columbus Commons, and possibly all the way through in the future.

"Having watched the transformation of City Center from opening to its demise, I think it's an opportunity to redevelop the site as more than single-purpose or for a single generation," said Keith Myers, MSI principal.

Columbus Commons is expected to include seven or eight new buildings. Four would face High Street and include 70,000 square feet of street-level retail and restaurant space. Three are to be built on the eastern side of the development, containing approximately 434,000 square feet of office space.

The 1,000 parking spaces under City Center will remain, as will the 3,600-space garage that Capitol South owns south of Rich Street. "That's a valuable asset," Worley said. "We need those spaces."

In the middle of the new development, a grassy park will remain as a gathering place.

Coleman said the project will involve a lot of heavy lifting, not the least of which is securing federal funds. Obama's proposed stimulus plan is being debated by the Senate, and it's unclear how much money would be coming to Ohio and its cities for "shovel-ready" projects. Coleman is advocating for \$32 million in stimulus funding to be used on Columbus Commons and surrounding projects.

Worley said the project would go forward without the federal money, although Coleman acknowledged it would be a tough challenge.

"These things don't happen by a magic wand," he said.





The view looking toward the north along High Street should include shops and green space.



ERIC ALBRECHT DISPATCH
 City Center is boarded up where the pedestrian bridge stretching across High Street was removed.



