

Retail

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PROJECT PROFILE

Tired, neighboring centers revived into one strong venue

By John Tschiderer

Imagine it if you can: two very tired and obsolete side-by-side shopping centers owned and developed separately more than 25 years ago.

Now, acquire both.

Next, plan, design, entitle, lease and redevelop a single, unified 550,000-square-foot community shopping experience.

That's the opportunistic approach Maryland-based **Federal Realty Investment Trust** took to redevelop **Mount Vernon Plaza**, a shop-

ping complex located in Fairfax County, Va., in the regionally and locally important Route 1 corridor.

Federal Realty acquired the two neighboring shopping centers in 2003. It embraced the multiple and complicated challenges of redeveloping and repositioning two properties into one cohesive retail product in an underserved market.

One center was anchored by **Shoppers Food Warehouse** and a vacant **Ames**; the other anchored by **Home Depot**, **TJ Maxx** and a

The centers in Fairfax County, Va., were redeveloped into one modern shopping center.



vacant **Frank's Nursery**. Each of the two centers was an architectural eyesore on Route 1 with no comprehensive tenant merchandizing plan to serve the broad customer base.

The fundamental challenge facing the development and leasing team was to create something special that would attract both quality retailers and satisfy customers and, of course, garner community and political support.



The redevelopment of the centers created an attractive new venue for the neighborhood's residents.

The approach taken by Federal Realty was to literally drive a central road down the common property line and organize five new buildings on this road such that the new retail interacted with the existing retail. This central spine road and associated buildings served to link the two existing properties, making it a more simplified experience for the critical vehicular and pedestrian access and travel paths.

The new buildings and reorganized parking fields are well lit and heavily landscaped with pedestrian walkways leading to public common areas for cafes and visitor social activities.

Now, three years later, the challenge to transform Mount Vernon Plaza into an inviting and productive community neighborhood shopping center has been met. New retail anchors **Bed, Bath & Beyond**, **Staples**, **Michaels** and **PetsMart** are open. Shoppers Food Warehouse has expanded. A complete façade renovation has attracted new specialty stores and cafes. Site improvements such as new paving, lighting, benches, planters, plazas and signage have been installed to add color and comfort to the visitor's experience.

A multi-disciplined devel-

opment team was put together to address the plethora of design and construction issues. Some of the more significant issues dealt with were: the technical issues of the façade renovation, a flat site with poor buildable-soils, traffic generation concerns expressed by the community and existing buildings with structural adaptive reuse concerns. Working collectively with the local permitting and building officials, community groups, elected officials and the **Southeast Fairfax Development Corp.**, all of the issues were addressed head-on and solutions established to meet the

demands of this tough endeavor.

In addition to the design issues, there was the challenge of understanding what the consumer wanted and needed in this market. Even before acquisition, Federal Realty conducted a market study that included a home calling survey to gain a better understanding of "what was missing in the market — from the consumers perspective" not just Federal Realty's internal perspective.

The new Mount Vernon Plaza, now complete, has been celebrated by elected officials and local residents. The center serves a much larger segment of the market and is a welcomed boost for the community. Government officials are praising not just the larger economic and community benefits of the redevelopment, but the process Federal Realty employed to get at the deeper redevelopment issues and to then deliver creative solutions beneficial to many. **R**

John Tschiderer is vice president for development at Federal Realty Investment Trust, a Maryland-based real estate investment trust. He can be reached at JTschiderer@federalrealty.com.

