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## Changing lifestyles create challenges for shopping centers

BY CATHERINE LACKNER

As life has gotten busier and more hectic, observers say, consumers want retail space that is convenient, multi-purpose and tailored to their lifestyles.

Michael Comras, CEO of The Comras Co., said two recent acquisitions provide both challenges and opportunities, but that he is aware of consumers' changing expectations.

In May, the group purchased CocoWalk, a once-popular multi-purpose shopping and entertainment destination in Coconut Grove had fallen out of favor. In August, it acquired the Shoppes of Sunset Place in South Miami, an imposing structure that seems disconnected from its surroundings.



Michael Comras

"As South Beach and South Miami became more popular, Coconut Grove retreated," Mr. Comras said. There is still a strong tourist presence, but "the location no longer appealed to the locals." Coconut Grove has an enviable demographic, as do the nearby neighborhoods from which it could draw, including Key Biscayne, Coral Gables and Pinecrest.

"I want to give this back to the community" and attract owners of upscale condominiums that are under construction on South Bayshore Drive, he said. Neighboring Mayfair was converted from retail to creative office space, removing 200,000 square feet of retail from the market but adding 600 new employees, he added.

"Our plan for CocoWalk is to really open it up, give it a fresh look, bring in tenants that are commensurate with the consumer who is out there today."

They might include contemporary boutiques, cafes with outdoor seating, and lifestyle businesses like those that provide gear for outdoor activities, that conduct spinning or yoga classes, and the like.

He said he would like it to be a place where parents could grab a workout, juice or coffee after dropping their children off to school, then shop in the boutiques.

To fill eight vacant spaces, Mr. Comras has allowed prospective tenants to institute temporary pop-up stores, allowing them to test the market.

Similar changes are in the works for the 10-acre Shoppes at Sunset Place, including the pop-up store concept, he said.

"We're seeking community input. At Sunset, we've assembled a great team with national experience. We want to cater to people living in the area," as well as people who work in South Miami.

It is relatively early in the process, but the team will consider changing the configuration of the building, which now presents its high walls to the surrounding streets. "We're excited about turning it inside out. We're talking to the community. We

want to give them the facility they deserve," Mr. Comras said.

"We want to design and merchandise these two assets so they don't compete against each," he said. "We want to bring in a healthy mix of cafes and boutiques."

And the location has to be convenient, he said. "With the density of traffic, how long does it take to get to South Beach? We have to get people out of their cars and spend time, and if you've done enough interesting things, you can do it. That's sustainable."

"In general, the retail market is on fire," said Rafael Romero, associate vice president at Continental Real Estate Companies.

However, the rise of Internet shopping and the live-work-play ethic have influenced developers of malls large and small to incorporate features, including restaurants, that offer a convenient experience that can't be duplicated online. "The Internet provided competition, and when there's competition, the consumer always wins.

"We are building a new tenant mix," said Mr. Romero, whose company leases the retail space in the Downtown Dadeland mixed-use development. "The live-work-play concept is changing the landscape. It's all about not having to get into your car, about taking Uber to a great restaurant nearby to have a good time."

Before working hours intensified and life got busier, it was common to dress the family up and go to a restaurant, even one far way, he said.

"It was an event," Mr. Romero said. "People still want to get out of the house, but now the real value is in providing a neighborhood place that is not out of your way. People want to feel comfortable, want to feel it's their own. It's not that our customers are lazy; they are extremely busy."

Dadeland Mall and other traditional large facilities that are mostly retail still have their fans, and Mr. Romero said he would never predict their demise, "but malls will suffer until they mold themselves to the times."

"It all depends on the location," said Masoud Shojaaee, president and chair of Shoma Group, which recently broke ground on CityPlace Doral, a shopping and entertainment complex that is to be open in about a year. With 350,000 square feet, it is one of the few large retail spaces in central Doral and is adjacent to office complexes and residential. "There is nothing nearby except Dolphin Mall, which is totally different than what we're offering."

Bass Outdoors, Fresh Market grocery, Kings bowling alley, Tommy Bahama-Island, Cooper's Hawk, Burger & Beer Joint, Sushi Siam, Cabo Flats and CineBistro are among prospective tenants.

"We have a waiting list for every space, with four to five companies on each list," Mr. Shojaaee said. "We are picking and choosing the tenants, which is a great position to be in."