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## **The retail development market appears to be making a comeback as 2011 begins**

January 27, 2011 - Retail

As 2011 begins to gain steam, so too does the appearance of a comeback in the retail development market.

The last decade or so, as everyone is aware, has seen significant changes in the way retail centers are developed. The move from large-scale suburban malls to smaller-scale urban "lifestyle centers" has taken root throughout the country, and even cold climate areas such as New England have followed the trend from indoor suburban to outdoor urban retail experiences. In Massachusetts alone, Legacy Place in Dedham, The Derby Street Shops in Hingham, The Shoppes at Blackstone Valley in Millbury, Bay State Commons in Westborough, and the soon-to-be completed Northborough Crossing in Northborough are all recent, successful examples of this new archetype.

From a site design perspective, there are significant differences that must be accounted for when developing plans for these properties. For example, small scale boutique shops, in many cases the lifeblood of these lifestyle centers, have felt a significant negative impact from the current recession. Therefore, one of the critical elements of our design work is to incorporate an adequate amount of flexibility in our plans to ensure these developments are able to continue to be successful as tenancies evolve over time.

Another way that the design of these retail centers significantly differs from their predecessors is that many of them have a true "mixed-use" component that allows the pedestrian experience to largely remain outdoors. This has forced us, as site designers, to re-evaluate the way we deal with the interface of pedestrian and vehicular circulation. For instance, at Bay State Commons, a mixed-use development in the center of Westborough that Waterman Design Associates designed and permitted for Philips International, a significant component of the project was the inclusion of a 2-acre public park that the developers constructed and then turned over to the town. We needed to develop a plan solution that accounted for a significant increase in pedestrians while still maintaining necessary vehicular circulation. This was accomplished through the introduction of widened sidewalks that connected the town open space to the retail area, and then continued throughout the retail zone to form a circulation network that created a safe and inviting environment for shoppers. Essentially, the streetscape became an extension of the historic downtown, instilling a unique sense of community that is central to the success of the development.

Because most recent large scale retail developments are geared toward the outdoor experience, solar orientation of the buildings, especially for the winter months, has become a critical factor during the site design phase. Ideally, we have found that maintaining as much southern exposure for the storefronts as possible creates the most comfortable pedestrian environment, reduces maintenance costs, and lowers heating costs during the winter months. Building canopies and trees add shade to these areas during summer months.

Grocery markets appear to be an increasingly critical component of these retail centers, acting as a vibrant anchor even during this period of recession. At Northborough Crossing, a 625,000 sf mixed-use development Waterman Design Associates is designing and permitting for New England Development, one of the major anchor tenants is Wegmans, a mid-Atlantic region grocery store chain which is building its first New England store in Northborough. At Bay State Commons, Roche Brothers Supermarkets is a major anchor tenant as well. These markets act as successful magnets to draw shoppers to the retail centers, and appear to be effective destinations in light of the reduction of 'big box' retailers.

Many developers are also turning to a Smart Growth development model for their mixed-use centers. In Berlin, Waterman Design Associates is developing a comprehensive master plan for a neo-traditional mixed-use village on 130 acres that balances conservation and development. By mixing the retail core of the village with residential and continuing care retirement uses, large tracts of open space are preserved as an integral characteristic of the project, allowing the rural character of the community to be preserved. As with most Smart Growth developments, our design creates less dependence on vehicular use and a greater emphasis on sense of peace, social interaction, and community.

In general, trends in retail development appear to mirror those of development in general - a greater emphasis is being placed on creating a communal atmosphere, site design is taking on a greatly increased importance in terms of attracting both retailers and shoppers, and many retailers are incorporating sustainability measures into their business models and are demanding that the developments where they sign on follow suit. Keeping pace with these development trends appears to be the key to maintaining a successful practice as we emerge from this recession.

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