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Project of the Month: Garden City Center thrives with The Wilder Companies' "only in Rhode Island" lifestyle approach

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Driving into the southern entrance of historic Garden City Center, the sounds of hammers striking, the whir of cement mixers, and the beep-beep of construction equipment on the move ring through the air. Finger-like steel girders from a new 38,000 s/f building stretch into the bright fall sun. Garden City Center is on the move.

Four years ago things were far different. The nation's economy was sputtering, consumer and retail habits were changing. One-by-one big box retailers Circuit City, Linens n' Things and Borders shuttered their stores nationwide leaving dark holes (85,498 s/f) in the midst of Garden City Center. At the time, some felt Rhode Island's first outdoor shopping center was starting to feel its 65-year-old age.

In reality, the Village at Garden City Center built in 1948, with its classic New England town center look and feel, was thriving with smaller footprint local, regional and national retailers such as Providence Diamond Company, Papa Razzi, and Williams-Sonoma.

To The Wilder Companies, which has managed Garden City Center since 2009, the big box closures provided a perfect opportunity to recalibrate and differentiate Garden City Center from its main competitors - the enclosed urban and suburban malls located less than 15 minutes away in Providence and Warwick. The plan was to develop a mix of retail options that were unique to Rhode Island and would create a one-stop lifestyle center. Wilder found success with a similar concept when it transformed the Methuen Mall in Mass. into The Loop a dozen years ago and then later found success with the same concept in Florida.

"Today retailing is about time and convenience," said Deb Di Meo, vice president of leasing for The Wilder Companies. "Wilder's vision was to create a destination where shoppers could buy clothing, gifts, furniture, get a haircut, do their banking, enjoy a nice restaurant, work out in a gym, go grocery shopping and more all in one stop, a true lifestyle center."

Wilder's multi-phase project, "uses a sophisticated contemporary design that pays homage to Garden City Center's classic New England Village concept and incorporates traditional elements and materials already found throughout the center," said Kelli Burke, Wilder's vice president of development.

Phase I (2012) entailed the transformation of the gazebo from an end-cap into the new focal point for the center as well as construction of a new 20,000 s/f building that serves as a bridge linking the village with the former big boxes. Pottery Barn moved from Providence into the new building in Feb. 2013 and J. Crew opened this month.

"What has always made Garden City Center special is the mix of local specialty stores like Mod Mama, Mel & Me and the soon to open Bistro 22 nestled next to national retailers like GAP, Victoria Secret and Anthropologie. For Phase II, we wanted to differentiate Garden City Center further by

transforming the empty big boxes into smaller spaces that would give us the flexibility to offer unique local, regional and national retailers that we previously couldn't accommodate," said Maria Salvatore for The Wilder Companies.

lululemon athletica liked the plan and opened its first and only Rhode Island location in a 3,332 s/f end cap in April 2013. Others that will soon open their first Rhode Island locations include: LA Fitness (December) and Container Store (spring, 2014). Corner Bakery opens in January 2014 and Sephora will open in spring 2014 as part of Phase II.

The changes are being welcomed by shoppers and endorsed by retailers alike.

"Since Pottery Barn opened in February our weekend traffic rivals that of the holiday season," said Joe Koechel, general manager. "Williams-Sonoma gave our plans a huge vote of confidence by continuing their long term relationship with us and by deciding to move their Pottery Barn division here. We've been able to demonstrate to other retailers that Garden City Center offers a unique mix of stores and a demographic base that provides a recipe for long-term growth."

All in all, 13 stores have undergone renovations since the project began. Further phases will see the addition of new restaurants and redesigned connections to the Whole Foods section of the center.

Today under the watchful eyes of moms and toddlers playing in the grass of the nearby gazebo and of shoppers with their heels clicking along the brick walkways of the classic New England retail village, The Wilder Companies vision for Garden City Center as a modern lifestyle destination is becoming a reality. Change is in the air.

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