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Bay State Commons new lifestyle center is a positive move in New England retailing

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Bay State Commons, a new lifestyle center is attracting leading national and regional retail brands even during a period of market unrest.

Unlike climate controlled regional malls and big-box stores, lifestyle centers such as Bay State Commons delivers an outdoor main street experience that includes fun, fashion, food and value in a walkable environment close to home. Adjacent to Main St., Bay State Commons is also bringing more shoppers to the downtown area. One of only a handful of lifestyle centers in N.E., the project includes the new 2.5-acre Forbes Memorial Park, as well as 44 condominiums.

Gorman Richardson Architects (GRA) designed the retail center, comprising 56 acres with 350,000 s/f of retail space, to give the impression of having been built over time. "This contemporary project, in the heart of downtown, mirrors Westborough's architecture and history," said GRA principal Scott Richardson, AIA.

Tenants include Stein Mart, Panera Bread, Ted's Montana Grill, Starbucks Coffee, The Paper Store, General Nutrition Corporation - GNC, Stride Rite, Roche Bros., Verizon Wireless, Icing by Claire's and TD Banknorth.

Aggressive Deals

"It's a terrific concept and the Westborough region features high income levels and population growth to support Bay State Commons," said Mass. developer Gregg Saunders, a Bay State Commons partner. "While many retailers may be adopting a wait-and-see philosophy, we're not waiting. We're aggressively pursuing deals with high-end national retail brands."

Ken Marvald, also a partner in Bay State Commons, said, "Economic uncertainty that includes higher gasoline prices may play a role in having local and regional shoppers think twice before journeying to the Natick Collection or The Mall at Chestnut Hill. More importantly, shoppers develop a relationship with our center that they cannot find at a regional mall. In-store traffic is a sure sign that Bay State Commons resonates with the Westborough community and surrounding towns."

The success of Roche Bros., with its new open-market concept supermarket at Bay State Commons, is a tremendous benefit when it comes to attracting national retail tenants. Roche Bros. combines supermarket convenience with the fun shopping experience of Whole Foods and Trader Joes. The store also played a role in attracting Stein Mart, a Jacksonville, Fla.-based department store chain with a reputation for offering the fashion merchandise, service and presentation of a better department or specialty store, at prices competitive with off-price retail chains.

Kathy Lussier, Stein Mart spokesperson, said, "With its beautiful setting, upscale tenants and accessibility, Bay State Commons is a great location for us. Our opening has been welcomed, generating inquiries and visitors from as far away as Conn. and R.I., where residents are familiar with the chain from wintering in coastal Florida and Myrtle Beach, S.C."

With a 30,000 s/f facility that includes an Olympic-size pool, Boston Sports Clubs is giving Bay State Commons another big boost in retail shopper traffic. Boston Sports Clubs also offers a basketball court and dedicated cycling and aerobics studios, as well as an extensive array of group exercise classes.

"The retail and restaurant mix, together with the daily activity of the Boston Sports Centers facility, generates activity and energy, especially among professionals and growing families," said Harmon Lewis, exclusive broker with National Commercial Brokers, Inc. in Needham, Mass. "The area's population and wealth are growing markedly, with average family income within three miles of Bay State Commons at \$147,000. Population is growing partly due to the high home prices in communities closer to Boston and by the economic development near the intersection of Rtes. 495 and 9. Development includes the corporate headquarters of Staples, Genzyme, and several other major companies nearby. This attracts management employees who want to limit commuting and raise their families in suburbs where home prices are affordable."

Restaurants and Relationship Retailing

Marvald said, "A decade ago, main street retailers in many N.E. towns had just about given up, ceding all but the local pharmacy, dry cleaner and pizza take-out to the regional malls. No more! Bay State Commons, as well as other lifestyle centers in the region are proving that New Englanders prefer this retail shopping experience."

Restaurants play a big part in creating an environment that attracts shoppers. Panera Bread has been successful at Bay State Commons with its neighborhood bakery-cafe branding. Panera offers casual dining, outdoor seasonal seating and pioneered a drive-in window at Bay State Commons that has been extremely well received.

Ted's Montana Grill enhances the main street feeling with its early 20th century architecture and outdoor seating. Approaching its first anniversary at Bay State Commons, Ted's has already established ties with the community. According to John Gordon, proprietor of the local establishment, "We did a chili and chowder cook off with the Westborough High School and are planning other community events. In addition, the restaurant is becoming a hot spot for business and social events, and impromptu after work gatherings."

Additionally, Roche Bros. reputation for community involvement is second-to-none. Stein Mart and Panera Bread are also active in the community and proponents of relationship retailing. Many Stein Mart employees are involved and well-known in the community. Stein Mart has already hosted a fashion show and other special events that have made it a part of the town's fabric.