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Southcenter mall expands, regroups with new retailers

By Amy Martinez
Seattle Times business reporter

When Westfield Southcenter unveils its \$240 million expansion Friday, shoppers might be surprised to learn that although the mall has gotten bigger, they don't necessarily have to go as far to find stores they like.

Before the expansion, space was so tight that retailers had to take whatever was available, resulting in some unlikely groupings. Now, says General Manager Andrew Ciarrocchi, retailers with a similar following have been arranged together, so that Coach is near upscale counterparts Bebe, Sephora and MAC, while trendsetters H&M and XXI Forever are close to Love Culture, Hollister and Fossil.

"If I'm a shopper at Coach, I'm probably a shopper at Bebe and Sephora, as well," Ciarrocchi said. "This has given us an opportunity for the retail space to make sense."

The expansion paves the way for 75 additional specialty shops, a food court looking out toward Mount Rainier, five new sit-down restaurants opening onto a tree-lined sidewalk, and a 16-screen AMC movie theater (which opened a week early for Friday's debut of "The Dark Knight").

Also, there's a rainforest-themed play area near such retailers as Stride Rite, Sanrio and Pumpkin Patch, as well as two family lounges where parents can feed babies or change diapers while older siblings watch kid-friendly programming on a flat-screen TV.

Westfield representatives took local media on a tour of the 400,000-square-foot expansion Tuesday to generate publicity for opening celebrations featuring an appearance by Gov. Christine Gregoire, live music and aerial acrobatics.

At 1.7 million square feet, Southcenter becomes Washington state's largest shopping center, surpassing Bellevue Square, Alderwood and Tacoma Mall, each at about 1.3 million square feet. The 40-year-old mall off Interstate 5 in Tukwila last underwent a major redo in the early 1990s.

The expansion also makes room for eight retailers new to the Seattle area, including H&M, Escape Outdoors (a new concept by Helly Hansen licensees), and two stores aimed at board-sports enthusiasts, Beach Works and Industrial Rideshop. Other newcomers are Pink by Victoria's Secret, Gilly Hicks by Abercrombie & Fitch, Aerie by American Eagle Outfitters, and Crazy 8 by Gymboree.

Australia-based Westfield broke ground on the expansion a little more than two years ago, and its opening now comes at a



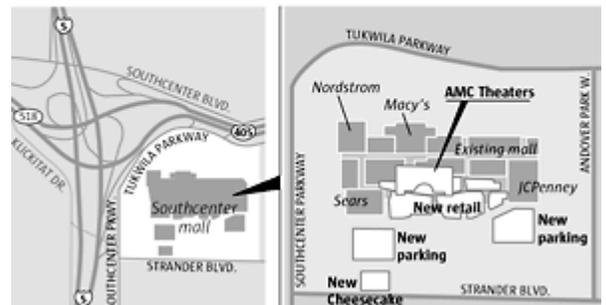
COURTNEY BLETHEN / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Westfield Southcenter Mall in Tukwila has a new, \$240 million expansion, with opening day set for Friday, which will feature an appearance by Gov. Christine Gregoire, live music and aerial acrobatics.



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At 1.7 million square feet, Southcenter becomes Washington's largest shopping center.

Expanding Southcenter

The 40-year-old mall off Interstate 5 in Tukwila is set to open 400,000 square feet of additional space for shopping, dining and entertainment.



Source: Westfield Southcenter

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difficult time for retailers nationwide.

Rising food and gas prices are cutting into consumers' discretionary spending, falling home values have left them feeling less well-off, and a credit crunch makes it tougher for them to borrow for things like a new fall wardrobe.

Even so, Susie Detmer, a broker who focuses on the retail real-estate market for Cushman & Wakefield, believes large malls appeal to consumers who no longer want to make multiple, gas-guzzling shopping trips.

"Once you get to the Southcenter area, you have your selection of virtually every retailer you'd want to go to," Detmer said. "I think that becomes more popular."

Elizabeth Best, of Seattle Pacific Realty, predicted shoppers will be "overly cautious" through the winter holidays, though the expansion "is one way to encourage them to come" to Southcenter.

"I think people want to believe things are going to get better," Best said. "But the reality is, people are tightening their purse strings."

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