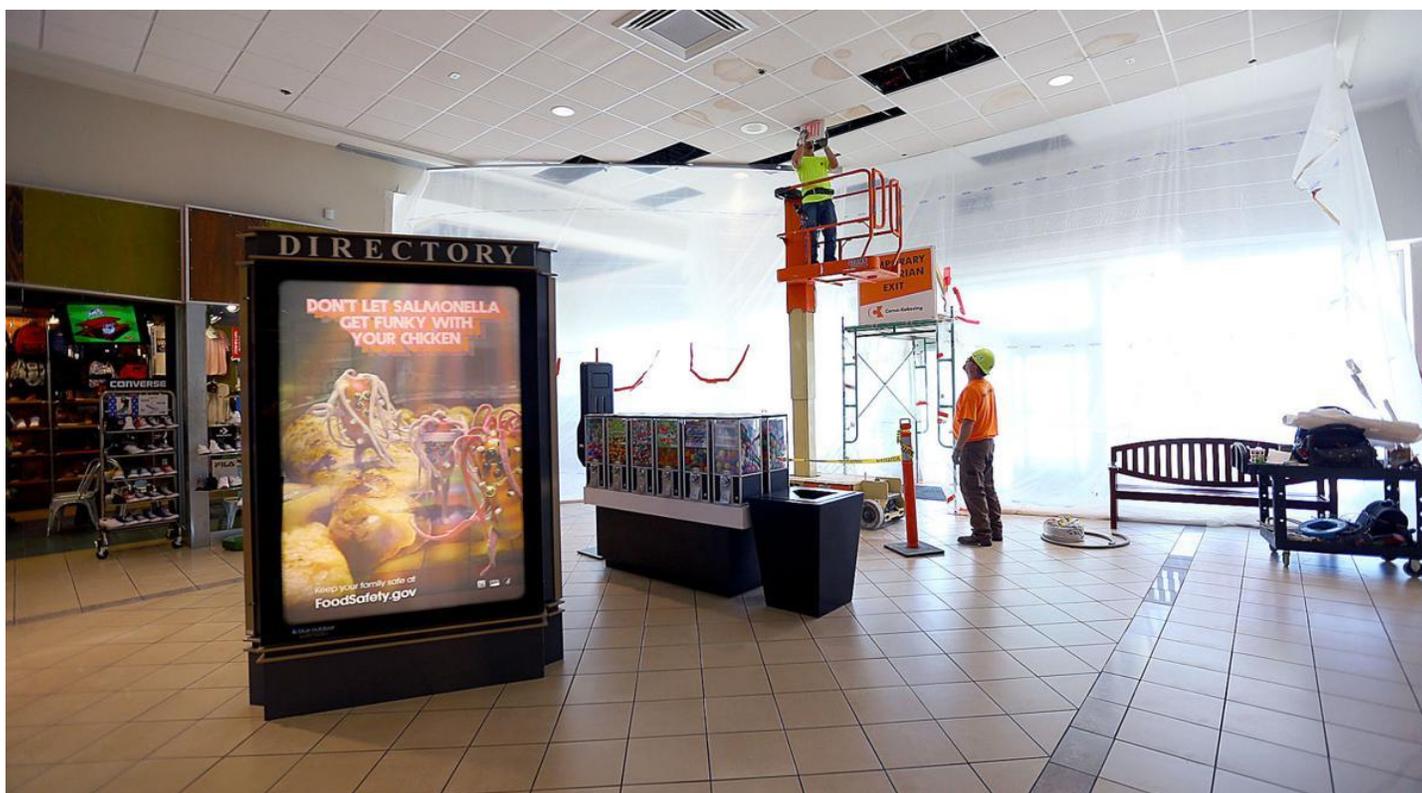


Markland Mall, in midst of redevelopment, adapts to changing landscape

New stores to open this year



Brett Aucoin and Brad Riggs, working for Huston Electric, install exit signs and lighting at the new entrance to Markland Mall, where Sears used to be located, on Sept. 5, 2018. Tim Bath | Kokomo Tribune



Pictured is the new entrance where Sears used to be located, on Sept. 5, 2018. Tim Bath | Kokomo Tribune

Markland Mall, in an age of withering and decaying mall properties, has stayed alive – it's even thrived.

Hit in March 2017 by the closing of its longtime Sears location, opened in 1968 as an original tenant, Markland Mall has responded with an extensive redevelopment project, replacing the famous department store with a diverse collection of incoming businesses.

Restaurants. Entertainment. Retailers. And even a grocery store.

Each has committed to making Markland Mall their new home – and in some cases have already moved in.

But why does Kokomo's mall seem to be bucking the trend, a shift that experts say could leave one-quarter of American malls closed by 2022?

And can it continue?

"I think the thing was, it was so static for so long," said Markland Mall and Plaza General Manager James Radabaugh, who also manages properties in Muncie, Tippecanoe and Fort Wayne for Washington Prime Group.

"The status quo from the '80s to the 2000s was: This is the shoe. Everybody wear it. But as things changed – you've got to be willing to jump on that change bandwagon."

That adjustment, explained Radabaugh, can be seen in the new expectations customers have for community malls. And the ability, or inability of failing malls, to give consumers what they want.

Gone are the days of a sole focus on clothing and accessories – although they still play a prominent role in the future of mall success, argued Radabaugh – and here are the times of a full-service offering.

"Would we have thought of having Aldi in a shopping mall? But that's part of the evolution – that's part of the evolution of what shopping centers need to be to people," said Radabaugh.

“Wouldn’t it be great to pick up your groceries, do some Christmas shopping and then stop and eat and go home and do it all in one place and not have to move your car?” he added later, also referencing entertainment additions like Gravity Trampoline Park.

Markland Mall will complete its most dramatic shift yet in that direction when its recent additions open for business, including: Prodigy Burger & Bar; Aldi; Party City; PetSmart; Ross Dress for Less; and OshKosh B’gosh, a children’s clothing store associated with Carter’s.

That redevelopment project will be fully operational by 2019, said Radabaugh.

“What you see being built out there is everybody who is bona fide, deals are sealed, they’re moving in,” he noted.

“That takes up all the spaces except for one. So there’s only one blank space right now. A lot of companies are coming to us very interested and excited because it’s a new development, so we’re in discovery with several undisclosed folks right now that are just checking it out.”

The mall still features two open pads, or spaces available to fast food or quick-service restaurants, in front of the mall and in between Arby’s and McDonald’s.

One of those pads is likely to be taken by Panda Express. Company spokeswoman Aileen Donovan said there “has been approval for a free standing drive-thru location outside of the Markland Mall that is projected to open late summer of 2019.”

A bigger deal, perhaps, is the evolution underway inside the former home of Carson’s, which closed in late August after its parent company, Bon-Ton, filed for bankruptcy earlier this year.

While Halloween City will temporarily fill the space until early November, Radabaugh said the mall is “all ears” when it comes to another temporary or possibly permanent solution.

He noted that Markland Mall has been approached by both national tenants interested in the site and people who want to divide the area and utilize numerous, smaller spaces.

“The sky’s the limit,” said Radabaugh. “We’ve got a canvas over there that we’re going to paint on, and we’ve just got to figure out what the art’s going to look like.”

Still, losing stores like Sears and Carson's has become a plight experienced by malls across the country, and many haven't been able to recover.

The loss of large attractions can diminish foot traffic in a mall and can consequently lead to the elimination of other stores. Sometimes stores even sign co-tenancy agreements with a mall, meaning their lease is dependent on the existence of anchor stores.

The Markland Mall remodel is pictured on Sept. 5, 2018. Tim Bath | Kokomo Tribune
Tim Bath

"When anchor stores close, it causes big problems for mall owners and other retailers in the mall," Howard Davidowitz, chairman of New York-based retail consulting and investment banking firm Davidowitz & Associates, told CNN in December.

"And I'd say this problem is only in its second inning."

But through increased entertainment, food and even services like Dr. Tavel Vision Center, a grab-bag approach has taken over Markland Mall – an adaptation Radabaugh hopes will mitigate the loss of stores that were once the property's cornerstones.

"To invest in it and redevelop it and keep changing it keeps everybody's attention. And that's just what we're trying to do – is keep everybody's attention," he explained.

Another tactic adopted by Markland Mall is to increase the residency of local businesses.

One example is Gravity Trampoline Park, owned by Shannon Anthony, leader of the renowned skate group Breaksk8.

"I've wanted to do something for my hometown for a long time," said Anthony in a previous interview about replacing American retail sporting goods chain MC Sports.

Also coming to Markland Mall is JBistro's Pizza, a local restaurant taking over the former home of Bella Pizzeria; KnockerBall Kokomo, owner of the inflatable bubbles that allow people to slam into each other without injury; and Soul Sisters boutique.

“What’s the success of the mall? It’s local,” said Radabaugh. “There are people here who live in this community. ... All those folks know somebody. Their families are here, their friends are here. They’re out here supporting it.”

One thing that isn’t going away, however, is online shopping and the numerous related challenges faced by malls in today’s business climate.

But Radabaugh believes malls still offer something Amazon never will.

“At the end of the day, people still want to shop,” he said, arguing that malls are not, like some experts believe, a format of the past. “Yes, online is great, and yes, it’s convenient, and, yes, we have vendors and stores out here that benefit from online. And we know that; that’s the reality of it.

“However, not everybody does 100 percent of their shopping online. They still want choices, right? They still want to impulse shop. They still want to touch it, feel it, smell it, try it on.”

Notably, Markland Mall will host its Meet Me at Markland Mall Family Fest from 4 to 8 p.m. Sept. 22, featuring food and beer booths, children’s activities and local vendors.