

Sporting goods store going in old Kmart

By REUBEN MEES

The allure of Hattiesburg's ever-growing retail market has finally landed a tenant for the former Kmart building at the intersection of U.S. 98 West and Westover Drive.

The Gander Mountain Co. announced late this week they will open an approximately 69,000-square-foot store as the anchor of the shopping center that is now known as Westover Crossing.

"This will be our first store in Mississippi, and we're very excited about coming into Mississippi and a market like Hattiesburg," Gander Mountain spokesman Tim Martin said.

The St. Paul, Minn.-based sporting goods chain has 105 stores in 22 states and the Hattiesburg project is one of 13 new stores opening in 2007, Martin said. The target date for construction is Sept. 1, and the store would open later this autumn.

Gander Mountain stores focus on hunting, fishing, camping and boating and have a variety of in-store services such as a gunsmith, archery technicians, a bait shop and boat and all-terrain vehicle maintenance center. They also have a large meeting room called "The Lodge" that is available for free use by outdoor groups or for business gatherings, Martin said.

"Part of our philosophy is keeping the outdoors safe for tomorrow," he said. "We want to make sure we are providing hunter safety courses and we have this space available for those kinds of courses or other outdoor groups or Cub Scout meetings."

Commercial real estate agent Andy Stetelman, who brokered the deal, said with an anchor in place it is now possible to move forward with leases on smaller spaces in the remaining 100,000 square feet.

About two years ago, Academy Outdoors announced plans to locate there, but the deal fell apart around the time of Hurricane Katrina.

"Some businesses are already coming back that wanted to be around Academy," he said. "We got a number of places like an exercise spa that could co-exist with their occupancy, but we're not far enough along to disclose that yet."

In the interim, the LongHorn Steakhouse, the Olive Garden restaurant and Microtel Inn and Suites have built on the outparcels.

Darian Pierce, whose family-owned company Piercon is doing the Gander Mountain project and has done the LongHorn and Microtel projects, said the location, which is the busiest intersection in the city, is ideal for a major retailer.

"The visibility and the central location of people coming to our area make it perfect. It's the first thing people see when they get off the interstate," he said. "It's another pearl in the necklace that makes up Hattiesburg."

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