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Westover-98 intersection sees growth
By Reuben Mees

When Mike Bird and his three business partners first dreamed of opening a martini bar in Hattiesburg, they had no idea where they might locate it.

But when a building about 100 yards from the busiest intersection in town became available - at Westover Drive and U.S. 98 - they immediately jumped at the chance.

As they prepare to open, possibly as early as late July, they have found themselves surrounded by a new wave of development that could make them a prime spot for an early evening aperitif or post-celebration nightcap.

"That was one of the biggest things we had been looking for the past several years - a good location," Bird said. The club, The Martini Spot, will be located on Westover Drive just north of U.S. 98 in the former Shipley Do-Nuts that closed after Hurricane Katrina.

"We figured Hattiesburg was ready for it," said Bird, who is a traveling nurse and has visited larger cities where martini bars are popular. "We're all 30-plus, and there's not a venue in town where we can go relax with friends to have a drink before or after dinner or the movie."

According to numbers from the Mississippi Department of Transportation before the hurricane, the U.S. 98-Westover intersection saw 61,000 cars a day. It was the fourth busiest section of U.S. highway in the state, ranking behind three intersections on U.S. 49 near Interstate 10 in Gulfport.

Those high-traffic numbers, fueled by interstate travelers and Westover's position as the gateway to west Hattiesburg's retail corridor, have piqued the interest of at least two hotel chains, three restaurant operations and other retail outlets, commercial real estate agent Andy Stetelman said.

"Most retailers are looking for traffic counts when they decide whether they will locate in an area," he said. "The more traffic that comes through an intersection, the more appealing it is."

Currently, the 90-room Hilton Garden is under construction, and building should begin within weeks on the 79-room Microtel Inns and Suites. Similarly, the city's first Olive Garden restaurant is under construction and a locally owned Caribbean Soul Island Bar and Grill is in the works at Westwood Square on the south side of U.S. 98.

Westwood is also in the midst of a facelift that will freshen its appearance, property manager Thena Gunn said.

"We're replacing roofs, cleaning up inside there where water leaks and lifting canopies to be repainted," she said.

Stetelman said he hopes to be able to reveal the identity of an approximately 100,000-square-foot anchor store for the former Kmart Supercenter building by September. If that happens, it could open the door to announcing a number of smaller retail outlets in the remainder of the 170,000-square-foot building.

"A big power strip is based on having an anchor in place, and the junior anchors will follow," Stetelman said. "We have smaller merchants that are willing to take the plunge, but you have to be careful putting in one or two small merchants that could interfere with where the major anchor wants to locate."

Previously, the Kmart building was going to be the home of an Academy Sports, but that deal fell through after the hurricane.

Darian Pierce, real estate manager for Westover Crossing, recently attended the International Council for Shopping Centers convention in Las Vegas and got some promising leads.

Right now, I would say there are at least six national tenants that are not in this area that are coming," he said. "They range in size from 2,000- to 10,000-square-foot boxes."

Pierce agreed that traffic is vital to business interest. The traffic count is extremely important," he said. "We're getting right up to their parameters." Gunn, whose company has managed Westwood Square since it opened, said once businesses choose to locate near the intersection, they don't typically leave. "Most of our clients are long-term since the late '80s or early '90s," she said. "At any given time, we're at 100 percent or no more than two small spaces available. We see the shopping center being full and helping the tenants for a long time."

She said increased traffic and new businesses should only help the existing customer base.

"Anything that draws people and traffic will only help," Gunn said. "With our new Caribbean Soul, that should bring in a lot of restaurant traffic for other businesses."