

East Alton Mayor Joe Silkwood describes local purchase of East Gate Plaza as "a great thing" for the region

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EAST ALTON – It is no secret the East Gate Shopping Plaza is a distressed strip mall.

East Alton Mayor Joe Silkwood hopes that is about to change with the ownership changing hands from Los Angeles-based Portland Investment Company to EG Plaza, LLC, with Julia's Banquet Center owners, Todd and Julia Kennedy as its principals. Silkwood said Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) numbers place as many as 24,000 cars passing the sprawling cracked parking lot and graying facades every day. He said anchors like Julia's Banquet Center, East Gate Cinema, the East Alton Ice Arena

and the Dollar General are great, but would be even better if the entire plaza had a modern update and redesign.

“I think the number one problem is that all those cars pass by,” Silkwood said. “There are some good things in there already, but everyone is passing by. People are seeing a close-to-dead shopping center.”

Silkwood said he could remember the shopping center in its prime, when JC Penney's was among its anchors, and people were flocking to strip malls. Then, the national trend became indoor shopping complexes. After development on the Homer M. Adams Parkway in Alton, including the Alton Square Mall, JC Penney's moved, and strip malls were becoming less of a destination.

“Reinvestment just didn't happen,” Silkwood said. “Buildings start to fail and tenants start to leave. First of all, we need tenants in there. Secondly, it has to be pleasing to the eye to get them in there. The facades need modernized. It needs to be a well-lit attractive-to-the-eye experience. Tenants will be glad to have businesses in there, and people will have a good time shopping there.”

These hopes are due to an investment and development plan being undertaken by EG Plaza, LLC, following the \$750,000 purchase of the plaza. Silkwood said ownership coming from the plaza itself will hopefully do wonders for the distressed shopping center as well as the entire Village of East Alton, which has suffered the ripple of the graying strip mall.

“The new ownership will be great for the plaza with fresh ideas and good ownership with future vision,” Silkwood said. “As far as residents go, this is going to recreate the place. It's been like that before; it used to be a destination. It will give them options in town for businesses and restaurants. It will be both a village and a regional destination. It will nicely complement the ice rink and movie theater.”

It should be noted, the ice rink is not included in the \$750,000 purchase. That rink is still owned and operated by the Village of East Alton.

However, once development starts at East Gate Plaza, Silkwood said he fully expects it to spread into other corridors of the village desperately in need of improvements, including the area around Route 3. He said he is optimistic about the future of the plaza and East Alton in general due to what he said is a “never before seen push” toward shopping local and small businesses.

“This entire region has a momentum I haven't seen in years,” he said. “People are grasping this shop locally idea with small town businesses. The whole region backed

Alton's push to be on *The Small Business Revolution*, and the new plaza is wanting to help create this idea. I'm excited our region is grasping the concept of shop local.”

If everything goes as intended, Silkwood expects the development of East Gate Plaza to be the largest of his entire administration, which up until now has mostly seen the development of housing within the village.

More details on the development itself will be available once a further interview with Todd Kennedy is conducted by Riverbender.com. A planned interview with Kennedy should take place Tuesday morning regarding his idea for the future of East Gate Plaza. Stay tuned.