

"Good Dirt": Hull Group Administrator Announces Big Plans for Alton Square Mall

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON – The Riverbend Growth Association's Economic Update Meeting was held at the Alton Square Mall near the former entrance to the now-demolished Macy's anchor to discuss its future.

Current mall owners, the Hull Group of Augusta, Georgia, sent its Vice President of Community Relations John Mulherin to discuss that future with several community members and stakeholders just before noon Wednesday. During his small speech, Mulherin worked to clarify and assuage several fears and concerns people have for the mall – a location many think is on the decline. Mulherin, however, said those concerns, while understandable, will not end badly for the Alton Square Mall.

Among the announcements made was a new rehabilitation center on the mall's second floor operated by OSF St. Anthony's Healthcare Center. As of now, the only other second floor locations are The Cookie Factory, Olga's Kitchen and the Christian Science Reading Room, not counting the second floor of J.C. Penny's. Mulherin said the location will bring more traffic to the mall.

“If they can come here for a cookie or for Olga's, they can come here to shop,” he said. “If people are used to the traffic of coming here for rehabilitation, they can come here to shop.”

Mulherin joked, saying the mall walkers who often frequent the second floor would get more exercise done if they were carrying bags from J.C. Penny's as they did it.

As for J.C. Penny's, Mulherin said he was thankful for that anchor, adding some of the improvements done to the mall of late have ensured Alton is not one of the locations national department stores choose to close – despite small secondary and tertiary markets like Alton (on which Hull Group specializes) being the main places those stores close.

When real estate representatives from major chains such as J.C. Penny's come to look at the location, Mulherin said improvements such as new lighting, signage and even lighter carpets help improve the way they view that location. Because of that, he said improvements made by the Hull Group helped retain J.C. Penny's as well as other locations within the building.

“If I wanted to sell my house, it wouldn't matter if it was the best house on the block if my neighbors were having yards of uncut grass and trucks up on blocks,” he said. “For a while, we were that truck up on blocks. Now we're not.”

As far as the thought of a movie theater in Alton – something about which many people have inquired – Mulherin said “the Hull Group is committed to bringing a movie theater to Alton,” adding he was “cautiously optimistic.” He said it was a matter of economics – projected cost versus projected sales. If those numbers did not bear fruit, he said this

effort would not work, going as far to say “if this doesn't go through, I doubt Alton will ever get a movie theater.” If one were to be placed in the mall, it would occur in the former Sears building.

More announcements about the mall's external appearance were made as well. After purchasing the mall in 2015 for \$1.75 million, Mulherin said the Hull Group invested nearly \$3 million into the property through the demolition of Macy's as well as internal improvements. Asphalt is about to be poured across most of the lot, including the outside of the former department store, but most of the dirt currently in that area will be leveled and seeded with grass and other plants. Mulherin said paving it would be counterproductive, as he soon expected a new business to establish a location there.

The Hull Group also purchased the 50,000 square-foot former OSF St. Anthony's Medical Mall located on the periphery of its upper lot. Mulherin said that property would soon be demolished to allow more of a view to the mall. The upper branding signage will also be extended from above the former Macy's entrance to the former Sears building.

As for the future of the mall and retail in general, Mulherin said he would work with technology and the future of retail. Many of what would otherwise be empty storefronts with metal gates are now covered with sheet rock plastered with informative murals of Alton's history. If stores want to open there, Mulherin said the sheet rock could easily be replaced by storefronts.

Tenants are the only element of the malls rebuilding not in the hands of the Hull Group. Mulherin said more tenants would bring more business to the mall, but he said he would like to ensure the tenants met the mall's standards. He said stores like “head shops” and “Southern pride shops” would not go well with the current tenants.

“If it was just about money, it would be a race to the bottom,” Mulherin said. “We could make this place like a flea market, but people wouldn't stay for their one-year, two-year and five-year leases. We don't have the 10-year and 15-year leases like we used to, but we are doing what we can to retain the good tenants we do have.”

As for the pacing of the mall's growth and stabilization, Mulherin said he felt the pacing was good, adding the Hull Group was “bullish about Alton,” saying the mall was in a good place for further growth. It recently purchased the Chesterfield Mall, but Mulherin admitted that mall may have been too close to its bottom at the time of that purchase. As of now, however, Mulherin said the Hull Group doesn't sell failing properties it purchases. It is also not a publicly-traded company beholden to Wall Street or its shareholders, so it does not have a return on investment to provide to investors.

Ultimately, the future of the Alton Square Mall is reliant on Alton itself. He said the town has good leadership with Alton Mayor Brant Walker and his administration's Economic Director Greg Caffey and is on “good dirt.” He also cited Alton's current retail numbers of \$500 million, which are on the rise.

“It's slow, but like a duck you see above water, it moves slow, but its feet are paddling fast,” he said.

Another announcement regarding further property development is expected in two weeks, Mulherin said