

# Major makeover for downtown retail hubs

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Denver's downtown retail hubs are about to undergo a transformation.

Denver Pavilions is in the midst of a \$25 million makeover. The Tabor Center is transforming its under-utilized food court into a health club that will appeal more to its office tenants. And Writer Square is sitting on a 10.8 percent vacancy rate.

Each of those entities has been criticized as being incohesive in its retail mix and built in a way that is somewhat inaccessible to the 16th Street Mall on which it sits. And each has dealt or is dealing with major tenant turnover.

But Downtown Denver Partnership leaders are pushing to create a more attractive and cohesive retail scene in the city's heart. And officials from both that organization and the retail hubs in question say the steps that are being taken are marking a path toward that goal.

"When I say to you 'retail in downtown Denver,' we hear the birds chirping. Nobody knows what retail in downtown Denver really is," said Joe Vostrejs, a board member for the Downtown Denver Partnership Management Group and chief operating officer of Larimer Associates, which runs downtown's Larimer Square. "Downtown needs to create its own unique retail personality."

Mark Sidell, president of Pavilions owner Gart Properties, has that personality boiled down to a new branding statement for his property: "Downtown Denver's definitive resource for individual style." And he's in the midst of altering his 347,000-square-foot, two-block center to back up that statement, a project he anticipates finishing by November.

The main goal of the makeover is improving the entry point to the Pavilions for the "river" of mall visitors who now see its featured corner businesses such as Corner Bakery or Hard Rock Cafe but may not wander into the interior of the outdoor area. Stairways beside the former Virgin Megastore will become illuminated stairs and an escalator, video screens will feature videos of interior stores and restaurants, and a blank wall on 15th Street will become an expansion of the Forever 21 store.

Sidell already has reconfigured elevators that ran from the subterranean parking garage to the first level of the center so that they now go all the way up to the third floor of the Pavilions. And he is putting planters and a lighted walkway into the middle of Glenarm Street to make the road that cuts through the center of the complex more pedestrian-friendly and less of a speedway for motorists.

His biggest tasks, however, will be finding tenants for three of the most prime properties: the mall-front Virgin store, the former Wolfgang Puck's restaurant over Glenarm Street and a vacant third-floor space above Hard Rock. He is searching for a big-name retail tenant for the Virgin space, a prominent restaurant to replace Puck's and a bar/restaurant that can feature third-floor patios above Hard Rock.

All of this will be done while looking to retain current tenants without raising rents severely in a time of economic downturn, Sidell said.



Mark Sidell (right), president of Gart Properties, talks with Matt Trasen, project manager for the Pavilions renovations.

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The rendition on the left shows how the Denver Pavilions looked before the remodel work (seen in top photo) got under way, while on the right is how the shopping mall will look when the work is done.



GART PROPERTIES

"The way we drive value [in the property] is not by saying: 'Look, I renovated the thing, your rent is higher now,'" he said.

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Downtown Denver Partnership  
Management Group

bar is expected to open later this year, partly in space that had been occupied by the ESPN Zone and partly in space that had sat unused on the mall since the be-

ginning of the decade.

The idea of the health club, already partly completed, has thrilled office residents, and opening what had been "dead space" along the mall has met some goals laid out by the Downtown Denver Partnership, said Bill Tresham, chief operating officer of Chicago-based property owner Callahan Capital Partners.

Across the street sits Writers Square, a 29-year-old hodgepodge of office (119,000 square feet) and retail (51,350 square feet) that last September was sold to a new owner for the third time in five years. The area, which also includes a 450-space parking garage, has 11.7 percent of its office space vacant and 8.6 percent of its retail space empty, according to the property's website.

Owners have not detailed their plans to fill the tenantless areas. But critics in the past have said the largely internal-facing retail space has no anchor tenant and no cohesive theme.

The only downtown anchor hub not going through a transition is Larimer Square, the 400-foot-long block of Larimer Street between 14th and 15th streets with a host of locally owned specialty shops and one-of-a-kind restaurants. Vostrejs and his group transformed that area from one of upscale retail chains to more nuanced boutique shops in the mid-1990s, and it continues to see success, he said.

Each of these areas at one time lacked a clear vision of what they wanted to be, said Jim Kirchheimer, Downtown Denver Partnership's economic development director. By defining that vision, all of the hubs give visitors a reason to walk or ride from one side of the mile-long mall to the other and patronize even more stores in between, he said.

"Now you're seeing kind of a re-do, and I think you're seeing that in all of the retail centers," Kirchheimer said.

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