

**ST LUCIE COUNTY**

# Fort Pierce outlet mall to be 100% occupied for first time since 1990s, including Bravo

**Ananya Tiwari**

Treasure Coast Newspapers

Published 4:18 p.m. ET March 27, 2024 | Updated 9:47 a.m. ET March 28, 2024

Fort Pierce's former outlet mall is expected to be 100% occupied by August — for the first time since the 1990s — thanks to new home development in the surrounding area, the owner said.

Florida Nexus Park, at Okeechobee Road and Interstate 95, will soon have 14 tenants and 40 electric vehicle charging stations in the parking lot, said ComNet Realty President Harry Zuker.

"Now that residential is growing all around the property, it is time to reintroduce it as a retail center," Zuker said. "Properties throughout South Florida with similar locations have proved to be successful."

The Manufacturer's Outlet Center was a popular novelty — one of only two outlet malls in the state — when it opened in 1988. But as more outlet malls opened over the years, it declined and even sat empty after the 2008 recession. It's been sold twice and its concept reimaged at least three times.

## From outlet mall to business center

ComNet Realty of Delray Beach has been renovating the 155,000-square-foot mall and attracting new tenants since buying it in 2007 for \$11.5 million, Zuker said.

A Goodwill retail store and adult training center occupy nearly a quarter of the mall in two of the 14 larger spaces, compared to 42 smaller stores the mall had when it first opened. The other nine existing stores are a mix of medical, service and entertainment providers. Imminent plans include:

- Bravo Supermarkets, which has hung a sign announcing its arrival, plans to open in June after completing \$3 million in renovations to the 21,422-square-foot space — the largest in the mall.
- Creative Learning Lab Academy plans to open a private school in August.
- Play Money, a pinball arcade that Zuker likened to Dave & Buster's, is expected to sign a lease in the coming weeks for the last vacant space in the mall, Zuker said.
- Tesla will install the EV charging stations this summer.

## **Fort Pierce mall reimagined over decades**

When Russell Development Corp. of Alabama built the mall, west Fort Pierce was but an I-95 pitstop with gas stations, two fruit stands, three motels and three eateries, according to published reports.

The outlet mall put the city on the map, attracting shoppers and snowbirds from all over. But a decade later, Florida had nearly two dozen outlet malls competing for the same dollars.

“In the last couple of years, the outlet industry in general has suffered some pretty significant reversals,” mall General Manager Austin Eriksson told the St. Lucie News Tribune in December 1996. “Essentially, the market has been oversaturated by outlet center development.”

Many Fort Pierce stores moved to Vero Beach’s twice-as-large Horizon Outlet Center that opened in 1994. Remaining stores complained of sagging sales, especially in summer and even at Christmas. Westport Ltd., Converse Factory Outlet and Ducks Unlimited Sportswear were among the stores that closed at the end of 1996. The mall was half-empty by 1998, according to the St. Lucie News Tribune.

The mall was reimagined and marketed as the Treasure Coast Home Gallery — another unique concept at the time. The vision was a place where potential homebuyers could preview residential developments and shop for builders, designers, decorators and home furnishings.

The idea caught the attention of the renowned Hickory Furniture Mart of North Carolina, which bought the mall, renamed it Florida Furniture Mart, and leased stores to outlet, factory, furniture and home accessory galleries in 2003.

## **Florida Nexus Park**

That same year, Gov. Jeb Bush unveiled a \$500 million plan to make Florida a biomedical hub, which he promised would generate nearly 50,000 jobs in 15 years, according to published reports.

ComNet Realty bought the mall four years later to develop it into a biotechnology facility.

“Unfortunately, the wave of biotech facilities slowed, their funding and profitability were questioned, and we were unsuccessful at landing any of our — or the state’s — targeted

potential tenants," Zuker said.

But there was a demand for quality office and service provider space in 2010, so the mall was reimagined yet again as a business park and renamed today's Florida Nexus Park.

The first tenant was Pro Golf Car, the largest U.S. licensee of Club Car Golf Cars, soon followed by Comcast, Maximus and Bee Electronics. After 2019, Goodwill and Justee College nursing school moved in. Between 2022 and 2023, leases were secured for Bravo Supermarkets, Broader MRI, Sky High Comics, One Hour AC, AE Engineering and the Creative Learning Lab Academy.

## **Tenants and store square footage**

- 21,422: Bravo Supermarkets
- 20,000: Gulfstream Goodwill adult training center
- 16,300: Goodwill retail store
- 16,300: Bee Electronics
- 15,860: Comcast
- 13,602: Play Money
- 5,000: Justee College School of Nursing
- 4,062: Sky High Comics & Games
- 3,500: One Hour Air Conditioning and Heating
- 2,500: Broader MRI
- 2,400: AE Engineering
- Unknown: GBTech
- Unknown: uSaveLED
- Unknown: Creative Learning Lab Academy

*Ananya Tiwari is a business reporter for TCPalm. You can reach her via email [atananya.tiwari@tcpalm.com](mailto:atananya.tiwari@tcpalm.com) or follow her work on Facebook, Twitter, and MuckRack.*

