



Terry and Maggie Luneke work on shoes at Terry's Shoe Repair in the Plaza La Mer shopping center in Juno Beach on Wednesday. GREG LOVETT/PALM BEACH POST

Juno shops sell for \$27M; tenants hope for a facelift

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JUNO BEACH – Plaza La Mer has a new owner, one that paid \$27.1 million for Juno Beach's largest shopping plaza and in many ways its downtown, and tenants and town officials hope the center will remain the same, only better.

The center, built in 1988 and home to more than 30 retail, restaurant and service businesses, could use a facelift, they say, such as upgraded landscaping, better signs and lighting and improved drainage in its parking lot. The town has cited the property owner for roof leaks to one of its five buildings.

Longer term, the plaza near U.S. 1 and Donald Ross Road could be redeveloped to include residences, as

the zoning allows it and demand for housing in northern Palm Beach County is strong. North Palm Beach is considering such a plan for the former Twin City Mall at U.S. 1 and Northlake Boulevard.

There is no indication that change will happen any time soon, and Juno Beach Mayor Alex Cooke has one wish for Plaza La Mer: "It is important that it doesn't get turned into a sprawling residential complex, more than anything else."

Many consider Plaza La Mer part of Juno Beach's small-town charm. The town's population is under 4,000 but will increase when two projects are completed. Pulte wants to build 40 million-dollar townhomes on the south side of Donald Ross, and Caretta,

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a luxury four-building, five-story 95-unit condominium complex is rising at U.S. 1 and Donald Ross.

The new owner, Bucksbaum Properties LLC of Chicago, specializes in urban infill retail properties. It closed the deal in September for the 111,361-square-foot center spread out in five buildings near the town's busiest intersection.

The Bucksbaum family has been in the shopping center business since the 1950s. John Bucksbaum founded Bucksbaum Properties in 2011. The purchase is the company's first foray into the South Florida market.

Bucksbaum purchased Plaza La Mer from an entity based in Bahrain and managed by Inanc Kirgiz in Delray Beach. The Bahrain group bought the 10-acre property for \$3.6 million in 1993, Palm Beach County Property Appraiser's records state.

Bucksbaum executives did not respond to a request for comment about plans for Plaza La Mer. In September, the company said in a statement that the acquisition aligns with its strategic vision and that the company is particularly interested in assets that offer a long-term potential for higher and better use.

"Our flexible capital, extensive industry experience, and unparalleled track record in development, property management, and leasing uniquely position us to capitalize on assets like Plaza La Mer and execute our strategy effectively in various markets across the United States," John Bucksbaum said in the statement.

Housing could become part of Plaza La Mer's mix if Bucksbaum Properties wanted to try.

The property's zoning is 75% residential and 25% commercial, and under a special exception, the mix could shift to 80-20, said Frank Davila, the town's planning and zoning director. In a split vote, the Town Council approved the 80-20 ratio this summer.

Cooke cited factors that might deter the company from building residences there. For one, he said that by his calculations, the center is profitable with the current rents even at the price Bucksbaum paid.

Juno Beach also has a 60-foot height restriction, or roughly four stories.

"You can't just come in and build whatever you want," Cooke said.

"That is why I fought so hard to get that code to 80-20. That is the only way I could protect us from Live Local and developers going crazy."

The state legislature passed the Live Local Act this year as a way to create workforce housing in Florida. It requires local governments to allow multifamily rentals to be built on mixed-use, commercial and industrial sites if the rents on at least 40% of the residences will be at workforce levels for at least 30 years.

Developers also could have built up to 12 stories in Juno Beach.

Under the 80-20 zoning, the first floor of all buildings would have to be commercial, Cooke said.

"It is one of the few protections we have been able to put into place against Live Local," Cooke said. "They absolutely will not get anything above 60 feet."

The Caretta project won approval when the zoning was 95 residential and 5% commercial and could not be built now, Cooke said.

Vice Mayor Peggy Wheeler said her understanding is that Bucksbaum will "maintain the status of the development based on current leases" for now, but said it's possible Juno Beach could see a mixed-use application for Plaza La Mer in five-to-seven years.

"It would be great to have the landowner just rejuvenate the complex, but as of now the town will have to wait until an application is submitted to know what the future development plans are," said Wheeler, a Realtor.

Town Council member DD Halpern agreed the plaza needs "a facelift" and said she hopes Bucksbaum "sees the value of retaining the plaza as a retail space" and recognizes the value of the businesses to their owners and to Juno Beach.

"Those small businesses are part of our hub. It is sort of our downtown," Halpern said.

The one-story center with its no-frills architecture and barrel-tile roofs resembles many South Florida strip centers built in the 1980s, but the small



The Plaza La Mer shopping center in Juno Beach sold for \$27.1 million.

GREG LOVETT/PALM BEACH POST

businesses are families' livelihoods and a convenient, unhurried stop for north county residents.

Long-time tenants such as Kirby's Sports Grille, Terry's Shoe Repair, Matty's Gelato Factory, County Line Pizza and Loggerhead Fitness and newer tenants say they love the location, the tenant mix and the clientele the busy center attracts.

The plaza is also home to service businesses, such as a dentist, an insurance agency, a law firm, a real-estate firm, nail and hair salons, a dry cleaner, a chiropractor and a yoga studio.

Tenants whose leases are up for renewal are being offered leases of up to five years. They are also pleased that a well-established company owns the center. Those in the center's interior say better signs are needed, as their businesses are not visible from the street.

Rick Opton is the owner and general manager of Loggerhead Fitness, which has operated in the plaza for 18 years and at 9,300 square feet is its largest tenant.

Loggerhead, which has 48 employees, serves an older clientele, with 7-in-10 of its 1,800 members age 55 and older. It offers daily classes to seniors, many of them in their 80s and 90s, who hope the fitness center stays.

"I need the gym. I can't play tennis anymore," said Dan Samele, 92, who said he has worked out at Loggerhead for 10 years and goes there three times a week.

Opton said it would be difficult to find another location, and that much of the plaza's future hinges on what happens to the old Tire Kingdom headquarters.

Originally a Winn-Dixie, the building was leased to Tire Kingdom from 2003 to 2019, when it moved to a larger space in Palm Beach Gardens. Small businesses occupy its north and south sides, but the main space remains empty.

Plaza La Mer tenants who met with Bucksbaum prior to its purchase said his team floated the idea of leasing to a grocer, such as Aldi, Trader Joe's or Whole Foods.

The foot traffic a grocery store could generate would help other merchants who say they want to stay at Plaza La Mer.

Matty Cairo has sold his hand-crafted Italian gelato from his shop for more than six years. He plans to open a second store in Stuart next year so he can expand his manufacturing space and sell to more restaurants, but he will keep the Juno Beach location as well.

Kirby's owner Sean Kirby has owned and operated the 150-seat restaurant and bar known for its crab cakes since 2004 after moving here from Maryland. The gathering spot for lunch, dinner and Baltimore Ravens NFL games features more than a dozen big screen televisions and two pool tables. He said the established clientele is something he and his staff of 18 value.

New businesses have moved in. JUPdog, a shop featuring collars, toys, T-shirts and other "swag" for dogs and pet lovers, is slated to open in November. Kevin Kelly moved to Jupiter in 2017 from Massachusetts after "100 inches of snow."

For the last three years, JUPdog had a store on Singer Island. Kelly said he decided to relocate to Plaza La Mer because of its location and foot traffic.

Isings Travel opened in October at the plaza. Jeanne Veldman, a Jupiter Farms resident, moved her office from Boca Raton, where she'd worked since 1975, to Juno Beach in September.

"I'm very happy," Veldman said. "It was very hard to find space. We found this particular unit and grabbed it immediately."

Terry's Shoe Repair owner Terry Lunneke, said he just wants to keep doing what he does best, repairing shoes and handbags and offering select leather merchandise for sale. In business since 1979, Terry's has been at the plaza for 28 years.

"As long as they don't tear it down and send me packing, I'm happy," he said.

Not every new business owner smoothly moved into Plaza La Mer. One has spent two years dealing with the condition of one building.

Soothe Your Soul owner Rena Joy moved to Juno Beach from Hermosa Beach, California, almost two years ago and leased a 1,750-foot space. Due to water coming in from the roof, air-con-

ditioning leaks and other challenges, she was not able to move into the space until this September.

Some days, she questions if she made the right decision to move and spend more than \$40,000 shipping crystals, gemstones, jewelry and other merchandise from California, where she had been in business for 28 years.

"It is a nightmare," said Joy, who makes her own moisturizers and other products and sells essential oils. "I had no way of even imagining all this would happen."

Joy said she dealt with a series of troubles: difficulties in finding an architect and contractor, the contractor taking longer than expected, a bathroom that was not up to code and an interior buildout slowed by roof leaks that remain unresolved.

Juno Beach's code enforcement office issued a notice of violation on May 15. Davila said the case will go to a special magistrate, but no date has been set.

The roofers say the problem is the air conditioning, which is the tenant's responsibility. The air-conditioning firms that have worked on the unit say the leaks are from the roof, Davila said.

After being given a temporary space on a month-to-month basis from October 2022 to August 2023, and paying rent totaling \$8,000 a month for both spaces, she moved into the shop in September.

However, she can use only part of it, as construction is ongoing.

Cohen Commercial Realty of North Palm Beach, which manages the plaza, did not respond to a request for comment.

Expenses have chipped away at the nest egg Joy had two years ago. She has survived with loans. Still, she is holding on to her dream of building a prototype store and franchising it.

"I have a long-term vision. I am not giving up," Joy said.

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