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## Lakeland Square Has New Tenants and Events Coming

THE LEDGER

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LAKELAND | One thing you can say about Lakeland Square mall is that it's a survivor.

Despite the economic downturn and major retailers that have closed in recent years - Gap and the Disney Store to name a couple - the mall, 3800 U.S. 98 N., is far from dead.

Major stores have expanded or renovated - see American Eagle and PacSun. New tenants are on the way, including Tilly's, a surf and skate shop chain based in Irvine, Calif., and Teppan Express, a Japanese eatery coming to the food court. Both are scheduled to open before the end of the year.

The mall, too, has a new leader. Chris Molho took the job as general manager earlier this year, replacing Gil Bankston, who took another management position within parent company General Growth Properties.

Molho, 26, graduated from Texas State University with a degree in business management and went to work for General Growth Properties. He first served as assistant general manager at Village of Merrick Park in Coral Gables and then was assistant general manager for Altamonte Mall and Oviedo Marketplace.

Molho won't give occupancy rates for his latest assignment, but said Lakeland Square is more than three-quarters occupied.

But when it comes to his overall marketing strategy, Molho is eager to talk. He says he's focusing on community events, building on work that was done before him.

An example of that community focus was late July's Shop Til You Rock event, complete with a live band and video games. Also, on Aug. 19, the mall launches monthly Happy Hour events that will offer shoppers samples and sales.

Here, Molho gives us a peek at the state of Lakeland Square.

**Q. Where does Lakeland Square stand right now and where do you see it going?**

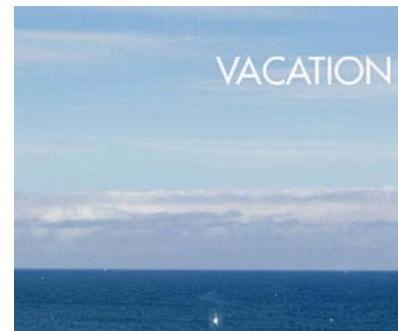
A. Our sales have been up every month for the year. We have Tilly's coming in and a new tenant coming to the food court. Lakeland will realize its full potential. National retailers are looking to expand. The fact that this mall managed to keep retailers that closed at other malls - like American Eagle - shows that someone sees something in Lakeland.

**Q. What do you think Lakeland Square mall has done right during this economic downturn?**

A. We have listened to our customers. We've brought in tenants that are viable and



Chris Molho, new general manager of the Lakeland Square Mall, in Lakeland, FL on Monday August 9, 2010.



useful. We've kept it clean and safe. No one wants to go to a dirty mall.

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**Q. How do you think Lakeland Square has been affected by the financial troubles of its owner, General Growth Properties? (In 2009, General Growth filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy to restructure its debts.)**

A. I think it's been more of the stigma and the public not understanding what's happening. The thing about bankruptcy is that people think you're shutting down. General Growth filed for reorganization to get time to get back on track.

**Q. You say the biggest challenge you face as general manager is the economic downturn. What can you do to combat that?**

A. We have to get people comfortable shopping again. We have to give them good, quality, affordable retailers and not bring in something people won't use.

**Q. How would you describe the interest in the mall from retailers?**

A. Leasing is done through leasing reps. What I can tell you is that the fact that Tilly's is coming and someone is coming to the food court shows that activity is happening. Leasing breeds leasing.

**Q. If you accomplish one thing while at Lakeland Square what do you hope it will be?**

A. When I go to a property, I want to leave it better than I found it. I would like to bring in more tenants, get people back in the mall, increase traffic and build on the already growing tenant base.

[ Rachel Pleasant Chambliss can be reached at 863-802-7533 or [rachel.pleasant@theledger.com](mailto:rachel.pleasant@theledger.com). ]

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