

Building Scene

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Auburn Mills' scope raises questions on mall's impact

Today's Building Scene explores the proposed Auburn Mills and takes a look at two similar mega-malls, the promises made before they were built and the reality since they opened. Franklin Mills, built in a developed area in Philadelphia, is profiled below. On Page 2, we examine Potomac Mills built in a former pasture outside Washington, D.C., and we examine how several other Mills centers are faring as they move toward construction.

By Gerald Frawley
staff writer

How Auburn Mills, the \$200-million, 2-million-square-foot manufacturer's retail outlet and entertainment center planned for Auburn Hills at Lake Angelus Road and I-75, will impact the surrounding area is a whopping big question mark.

Only two similar large-scale discount malls, both built and operated by Western Development Corp., exist. With so few examples, local and regional planning officials have difficulty gauging Auburn Mills' potential effects. Two similar developments, Potomac Mills, just outside of Washington, D.C., in Prince William County, opened four years ago, and Franklin Mills, in northeastern Philadelphia, Pa., opened in May 1989. In the Detroit area, the granddaddy of retail malls, though not a discount outlet mall, is Northland with 1.7 million square feet.

Western Development also plans similar malls for Sunrise (suburban Ft. Lauderdale), Fla.; Ontario, (suburban Los Angeles), Calif.; and Gurnee (suburban Chicago), Ill.

A "super-regional specialty center" like Auburn Mills is the next evolution in retailing, assembling more than 100 stores that sell merchandise at 20 to 60 percent below manufacturer suggested retail prices, according to Western Development. The mega-malls sport indoor recreational/entertainment com-

plexes with activities like batting cages, miniature golf, roller skating, bowling lanes and arcades.

Western Development is also proposing a 200-room hotel and 375,000 square feet of additional retail space on Auburn Mills' periphery for movie cinemas, health clubs and family convenience and theme restaurants.

Western Development is currently reviewing the project and does not expect the final site plan to be completed for several months. Wetlands mitigation and the exact placement of the structure on the site are still under review.

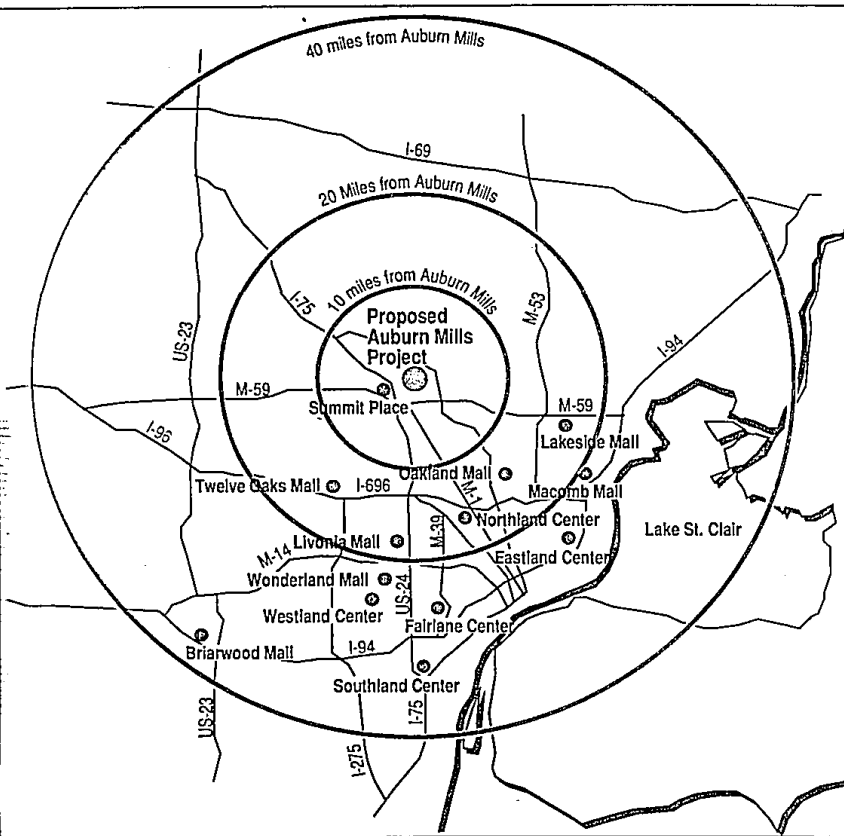
Auburn Mills has been mired in controversy since it received zoning and preliminary site plan approval last summer.

Three communities opposed to the mall — Southfield, Lake Angelus and Rochester Hills — asked the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) to undertake an unprecedented regional impact study on a private project.

THE NON-BINDING study concluded the mall will impact traffic patterns, the environment, economies and public safety beyond the borders of Auburn Hills, but because the project is unusual, it's difficult to gauge the potential impact.

SEMCOG also found that more than the three communities were

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SEMCOG map

Auburn Mills, meet the competition. Map shows the distribution of regional shopping centers within a 10-, 20- and 40-mile radius of the proposed Auburn Mills project. According to SEMCOG's

regional impact review, projects such as Auburn Mills tend to draw their customer base from areas well beyond the traditional 10-mile local trade area.

Former race track site of mega-mall

By Gerald Frawley
staff writer

Franklin Mills has been a boon to northeastern Philadelphia, Pa., with the possible exception of antisocial pressure on the police force, according to local officials.

Most officials are enthusiastic about the \$200-million mall which opened in May 1989 on the abandoned Liberty Bell horse race track site and is now experiencing the frenzy of its first holiday shopping season.

Robert Heister, Philadelphia city planner, said Western Development met little resistance to its project. "There were some minor things that people were blowing up, but nothing of real consequence."

"Traffic, he said, was probably the main concern, but the developer paid for several minor road improvements to enhance traffic flow. Major repairs, Heister said, weren't necessary because the roads in the area were underutilized.

THE FRANKLIN MILLS site is bounded by a four-lane residential and six-lane state highway

with good access, Heister said. Local roads haven't experienced much of an impact because most people use the highways.

"We were lucky we had good infrastructure already there because of the race track," Heister said, adding that if the property had been redeveloped with single-family housing, the impact would have been much greater.

"There has been a strain on the community, but the benefits should far exceed the costs," he said.

According to Mark Kissel, vice president of market research for Western Development, the mall owner, it is difficult to assess Franklin Mills' economic benefits because the mall hasn't been open for an entire year and is only 75 percent occupied.

"We won't have a good handle on it until next year," Kissel said, adding the only figures he has are estimates made in 1986.

According to those estimates, the mall will generate approximately 2,500 jobs and \$3.7 million in total tax revenues in its first full year of operation. Philadelphia's cost for having the mall will be about \$1 million.

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Opened in May, Franklin Mills houses more than 130 shops, restaurants and entertainment facilities.

GUY WARREN/staff photographer

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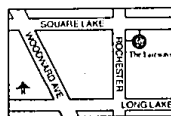
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