

Favorable reviews greet Potomac Mills

By Doug Funke
staff writer

Officials in Prince William County, Va., give rave reviews to Potomac Mills, a 1.3 million-square-foot manufacturer's outlet retail mall 25 miles south of Washington, D.C.

The mall, built on 188 acres at a cost of about \$100 million, opened amid much fanfare in September 1985 on the site of a former cow pasture off I-95.

"I believe people generally view the mall very favorably. All the facts show it's done exactly what it's supposed to do," said John Gessaman, economic development director for Prince William County.

Potomac Mills generated a net \$3.6 million in tax revenue last year where \$2.8 million had been projected, said Mark Kissel, vice president of market research for Western Development Corp., owner of the mall.

As for jobs, 3,100 have materialized where 3,000 had been projected, Kissel added.

NO ORGANIZED opposition surfaced during the mall's planning, which was carefully monitored by the Lake Ridge-Occoquan Civic Association.

"Our group was for the mall," said Jack Kooyoomjian, chairman of the association's planning, environment, land use and transportation committee.

"There were some concerns about signage, traffic, parking and aesthetics," he added. "I wish things were a little improved here and there, but on balance I'd say it's a net benefit to the county."

Prince William County has experienced tremendous growth during the last decade. The current population of 240,000 compares to 140,000 in 1980, Gessaman said. Median annual family income is \$50,000.

There were no major shopping centers in the eastern part of the county prior to the opening of Potomac Mills, said James Cox, executive vice president of the Prince William County Chamber of Commerce.

BECAUSE THE land was zoned for commercial or industrial use, local residents couldn't say they were stunned by the mall's construction there, Kooyoomjian said.

County officials agreed to expe-

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dite the planning and permit approval processes but offered no economic assistance for the mall, Gessaman said. Tax abatements aren't given in Virginia.

Western Development paid to extend sewers and water lines, make road improvements and build a stormwater retention system at the site.

But due to county growth in general, voters last fall approved a \$53 million bond issue for two recreation centers, a pair of libraries, a police/fire training center and roads.

About \$66 million of that issue will go toward roads, both new and improvements, Gessaman said. Some \$20 million is earmarked specifically for a parkway that services Potomac Mills.

A SPECIAL taxing district, including the mall, will generate additional revenue for area road improvements because these businesses will specifically benefit from the improvements.

That money apparently will be needed.

Consider that Western Development plans to add upwards of 700,000 square feet to Potomac Mills. The next phase is an 180,000-square-foot indoor recreation complex called 49th Street Galleria, Kooyoomjian said.

Two shopping centers, each larger than 100,000-square feet, have opened nearby since the mall's grand opening. Two other shopping centers of at least 100,000 square feet are planned, Gessaman said.

But that's not all. Upwards of 3 million square feet of office space have been proposed for the area.

Surveys show that only 37 percent of shoppers at Potomac Mills live within the county, Gessaman said. A 150-room Days Inn motel was built

nearby to accommodate visitors coming from a distance. Another hotel/motel is likely.

COME SHOPPERS do — about 13 million to the mall last year — mostly from Virginia, Maryland, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, D.C., North Carolina and South Carolina, said Cpl. Jerry Mouser of the Prince William County Police.

Once the shoppers arrive, they're well-behaved.

Crime at Potomac Mills seems astonishingly low. The following figures for 1988 were reported by Mouser:

- Larceny — 258 incidents.
- Shoplifting — 93.
- Auto theft or tampering — 35.
- Vandalism — 52.

For comparison, Troy police recorded 13 auto thefts, 63 shopliftings, 29 larcenies and 12 incidents of vandalism at the Oakland Mall during a 36-day period last Nov. 25 to Dec. 30.

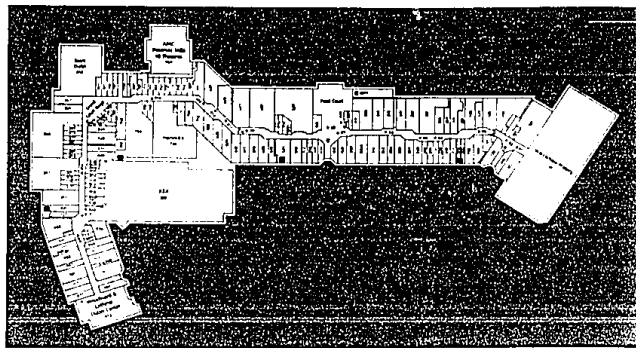
"One thing we feel keeps the figures low is they put police officers in here from when the mall opened," Mouser said.

A contingent of four county officers is permanently assigned to supplement the mall's regular security force of 15.

TRAFFIC ALONG I-95, a major commuter route to D.C., is often bumper to bumper but would be so with or without Potomac Mills, Gessaman said.

Things could be worse because the mall isn't open for business during the morning rush hours and commuters generally aren't headed into the district on weekends, he added.

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Potomac Mills houses 32 restaurants, 23 home furnishing stores, 32 gift and service stores, 23 clothing stores, 43 men's clothing stores and 41 shoe and fashion accessories stores. children's clothing and toy stores, 57 women's

Smooth sailing for other malls under development

By Gerald Frawley
staff writer

Other discount mega-malls either under construction or proposed by Western Development Corp. are facing less opposition than Auburn Mills.

According to Norman Priest, director of community and economic development in Ontario, which is about 40 miles east of downtown Los Angeles, Ontario Mills has generated little controversy.

"So far it's been very easy," he said.

Ontario Mills, still in the initial planning stages, will be built on the old Ontario Motor Speedway site which closed down in the early 1980s.

Site plans, zoning changes and infrastructure improvements for which the developer will pay a special assessment are still under discussion.

The redevelopment of the speedway will be a boost for the community because of the jobs and tax money it will generate, Priest said.

"WE'RE LOOKING forward to the project," he said. Once completed, Ontario Mills will generate approximately \$5 million in sales and property taxes for the local community and schools.

Sunrise City (Fla.) residents were amazed at the projected size of the mall and were skeptical that it could be done in their community, but they never opposed the project.

Conventional tax abatements won't be given for the project, but the city gives reimbursements for property and sales taxes in Community Development Facility projects similar to special assessment districts.

Unlike Auburn Mills, southwest California is not experiencing anti-growth sentiment, Priest added. "There's interest in that, but there's not a strong, organized anti-development effort."

The surrounding area has been developed with office, multiple-residential and hotel uses, but there is still vacant land nearby for future development, he said.

SAWGRASS MILLS, located in Sunrise City west of Ft. Lauderdale, is already a year into construction with completion targeted for Sep-

tember 1990.

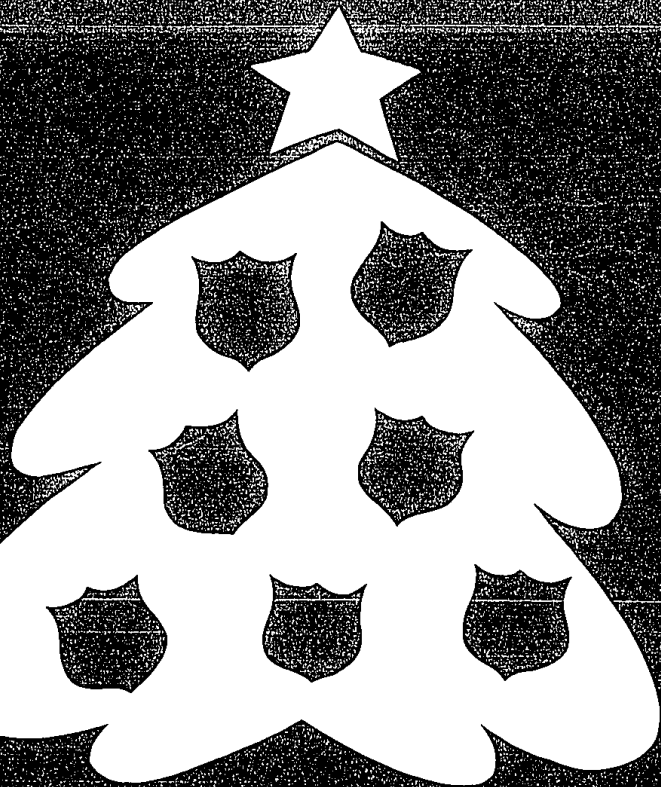
According to Sunrise City economic development director Bill Duffy, southeast Michigan "is blessed" that Western Development has decided to build Auburn Mills. "The people we've worked with have been tremendous, and the boost to the economic base is outstanding," Duffy said.

When completed, Sawgrass Mills is expected to generate \$7 million in property and sales taxes annually in addition to one time fees of \$17.5 million, he said.

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