

## **Reshaping Woodbridge: Once the place to shop, Marumsco Plaza getting a facelift**

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Sheila Beaty may not be a local historian but she is well versed in the evolution of Marumsco Plaza in Woodbridge.

An avid movie goer as a child and eventual property management company employee, Beaty has seen how the once popular shopping center has changed for the worse.

By the time she was working for Southern Management in the early 1990s, "it was already going downhill," Beaty said.

Today, empty storefronts and parking spaces litter the southern end of the massive shopping center, which is now anchored by Big Lots and Peebles department store. On the far end, it is much the same.

Once a popular hub for grocery shoppers for more than four decades, Super Giant has sat vacant since 2008—a victim of, in large part, the Potomac Mills effect and new and more dynamic grocery stores, like Weg-mans up the road.

Along with the fragile economy and the bursting of the housing bubble, the illegal immigration resolution passed by the Prince William Board of County Supervisors two years ago also had a tangible effect on the plaza's businesses.

Surrounded by empty spaces, Rent-A-Center has seen a dramatic dip in its customer base—which assistant manager Luxy Melendez blames in large part to the resolution.

"We had 815 customers and right now we're at 711," Melendez said last week. "...A lot of good people we lost."

To add insult to injury, the space formerly occupied by Shooter's Paradise— a popular range for gun enthusiasts that was gutted by a fire in 2007— was set to be filled before the business owner passed away last year.

But changes are afoot these days. Starting this week, the plaza will be renovated to the tune of \$13 million. This includes a new facade and parking surface that will feature landscaped islands dotting the expansive blacktop.

The facade work is expected to be done by the summer with the parking lot work to immediately follow, according to co-owner Kevin Sells of Manassas-based Mid-Atlantic Real Estate Investments Inc.

Ownership will also be welcoming new businesses to the center. Todos Supermarket, a popular Hispanic grocery store down the street from Marumscos, has signed a lease to take over the space formerly occupied by Giant.

While "treading water" like many other businesses, Todos has outgrown its current spot, said owner Carlos Castro. Moving into the larger spot makes sense, said Castro, because he wants to expand Todos' customer base.

Approximately 50 percent of his customers are non-Hispanics. The current Woodbridge location and the one in Dumfries are expected to remain open, said Castro.

## THE PLACE TO BE

With very few options in Prince William County in the 1960s and 70s, Marumscos Plaza was the place to shop for thousands of residents up and down the U.S. 1 corridor.

Along with Giant supermarket, it sported a Peoples drugstore, a movie theater, a pizza parlor and even a pond with a fountain near the current Wachovia Bank site.

"My mom wrote to my grandmother [about the plaza]," Beaty said. "She was so excited about a new grocery store. It had everything. You could buy a mop and you could buy a hamburger. We, came from upstate New York and there was nothing."

"We used to love going into Peoples Drug when they had the dining area and soda fountains," said Woodbridge native Dorothy Lowe, who now lives south of Fredericksburg. "You could sit at the bar and have an ice cream."

A 1983 Gar-Field graduate, Beaty remembers being dropped off by her mother at the plaza so that she and her friends could take in a movie and a slice of pizza from Brother's Pizza.

"For a sixth-grade field trip, I saw the original Romeo & Juliet," Beaty said. "I saw Star Wars then [too]."

Dave Barron, who grew up just nearby on Mt. Pleasant Drive, said the theater was beautiful. One of his favorite memories of the theater was an incident involving the long-running Star Wars movie and a teenage prank.

"They used to have a marquee that sat in the parking lot," Barron said. "Someone rearranged Star Wars and it spelled out Raw Rats. It lasted three days before they realized it and changed it. It was hilarious. People got sick of seeing Star Wars up there."

As the years wore on, though, the shopping center became no laughing matter. By 1987, the theater moved out and by the mid- 1990s, both G.C. Murphy's department store and Alexandria-based Peoples had departed.

As an employee of Southern Management, Beaty remembers painting yellow striping on the curbs during a renovation of the center in the early 1990s. Unfortunately, she also remembers times when she used to show apartments at nearby Bayvue and potential residents would ask about the old police substation that was located on Fisher Drive.

After she drove them by a police cruiser with missing tires, people would ask, "Wow's the crime around here?" said Beaty.

According to Barron, whose father worked a government job in Washington for several decades, the change in the neighborhood demographics began in the 1970s when government employees and military officers started to move their families to the new Lake Ridge neighborhood.

By the 2000s and thanks to the subsequent boom in commercial and real estate development in Prince William County, the area had become largely Hispanic. When the boom ended, values of the homes around Marumscot tanked, foreclosures became rampant and area businesses began to suffer.

## NEW BEGINNING

Sells purchased the shopping center six years ago with the hopes of eventually giving it a facelift.

Unfortunately, just when he wanted to get the ball rolling, the economy bottomed out, lengthening the process by several years.

"I am a very impatient guy," Sells said. "I have wanted to do this for a long time. ...We wanted to tear it down but obviously the economy turned on us. We are trying to get this thing brought back to life."

According to Sells, at least two of the tenants will be switching spots—including Rent-A-Center—and he expects to ink a handful of new businesses in the near future.

Mattresses For You has a building permit approval and will be moving in next to the former Shooter's Paradise. Sells said he is also in discussion with a national coffee chain.

Eventually, Sells wants to tackle the abutting Jefferson Plaza, parts of which have stood vacant for years. But for now, Sells' project is the start of what area civic leaders hope is the beginning of a new Woodbridge.

County Supervisor Frank Principi has been a strong advocate for the North Woodbridge Master Plan, which was just formerly approved by the board earlier this month. While it doesn't go as far south as the Marumscot Plaza, the plan addresses a 160-acre piece of land where traffic is a nightmare and many properties are vacant and unkempt.

"We want to provide people with a place to live, work and play," Principi said.

Castro said he's excited to be part of the new and improved Marumsco Plaza.

"It's going to give a different look to that area and it will also provide more employment in the area," Castro said. "And most important, we don't want to look like an abandoned community."