

Outlets Outlasting Recession's Blows

Lake Buena Vista Factory Stores not only keeps retailers, but is adding some.



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Book Warehouse recently celebrated its grand opening at the Lake Buena Vista Factory Stores.

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LAKE BUENA VISTA | The recession has been tough on retailers as consumers cut back on their spending out of worries about their jobs or as they suddenly find themselves in the unemployment line.



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Terry Lynn Morris, director of marketing for Lake Buena Vista Factory Stores.

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Miguel Hernandez, assistant manager of Rawlings.

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More than a few shopping malls across Central Florida have lost stores and had a tough time finding new tenants to replace them.

So when the Lake Buena Vista Factory Stores recently celebrated the opening of the new Book Warehouse, it symbolized the health of this shopping center that first opened in August 1996. Even as so many retailers have struggled through the economic downturn, Lake Buena Vista Factory Stores has been able to hold onto the bulk of its stores and even to attract new ones - no small accomplishment in a state that's among the hardest hit since the housing market crashed.

Terry Lynn Morris, the director of marketing for the shopping plaza located just a couple of miles from Walt Disney World, said the development's managers, and the store owners, themselves, banded together in 2009 and worked hard to keep business on track.

"I always like to think of us as being like Southwest Airlines," she said. "Top to bottom, we all work together like a team. And I think we did well last year."

It's not that the stores in Lake Buena Vista Factory didn't suffer along with most other retailers. Michelle Vivas, who runs San Antonio Shoes, said her sales went down in 2009.

But business has gotten better this year, Vivas said, as consumers seem more confident.

"We're doing pretty good, not bad at all," she said, noting that the shopping plaza's close proximity to Disney helps - and not just because of the tourist traffic that the theme park giant brings to the area.

"We get a lot of Disney employees," Vivas said. "And a lot of their banquet workers."

Miguel Hernandez, the assistant manager of the nearby Rawlings, said business has held up there despite the rocky economy.

"We're doing pretty well," he said. "There's a lot of mall traffic, and that's helping us a lot."

"Rawlings has done well here," Morris said. "They have held their own, and we love having Rawlings here."

Morris said Lake Buena Vista Factory stores did lose some tenants in 2009, but that was largely because they were part of national chains that were closing its stores nationwide - a trend that doesn't necessarily reflect negatively on this local shopping plaza or its location.

"We had a six-month period when there was a falloff," she said. "But we lost stores only because of corporate closings."

The fact that Book Warehouse would become the latest store to join the outdoor shopping center is a sign that companies still think it is a good location to operate in, she said.

"Our outlet stores are really spacious," she said.

"They're larger than your average outlet center. You've got the convenience of storefront parking, and we've got that teamwork from top to bottom."

Brian Miller, director of store operations for Book Warehouse, added that his store was "committed to building a strong partnership with the community. The bookstore also will support education by offering special discounts to teachers and librarians, and we're available to set up at book fairs."

Vivas noted that her store has been at Lake Buena Vista Factory for five years, and always done well.

"I love it here," she said. "Everybody is great here."

Hernandez agreed, saying "We've been here for four years, and we're one of only three Rawlings in the entire world."

Lake Buena Vista Factory Stores, located at 15657 S. Apopka Vineland Road (State Road 535), has also expanded to include a food court, and the Lake Buena Vista Resort Village & Spa with its condo-hotel rooms, as well as a 9,000 square foot Reflections Spa and Salon. Morris said that kind of diversity has helped them maintain a competitive edge in a difficult economy.

"We have a strong local following," she said.

"You can stay here, you can play here, and you can eat here."

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