

## San Gabriel Valley shows signs of retail life

By Ryan Carter, Staff Writer

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WEST COVINA - Even with retail's bleak outlook, some local businesses are picking up activity as expansion plans and building proceed.

Case in point: Best Buy.

A new one is being built at the site of the old Macy's on the north side of the Westfield West Covina mall.

Officials plan to open the 48,000-square-foot electronics store in the beginning of August. It's a move across the street from the store's current location on Lakes Drive.

For Best Buy, it's a chance to keep growing, coming on the heels of the opening of Best Buy in Duarte last month.

"We're always looking for opportunities to grow the business," said Erin Bix, spokeswoman for Best Buy.

Mall officials see the move as a boon, and as part of a larger expansion effort.

"We believe in reinvesting in our property to meet the demand of our customers and to bring them what they want," said Amanda Farnsworth,

Westfield West Covina's marketing director.

For the mall, that translates not only to a new Best Buy, but to an offering of new restaurants and shops coming in 2010, most notably an XXI Forever - a new flagship store belonging to the Forever 21 franchise.

New shops will help connect the Best Buy with the mall, Farnsworth said.

The new activity in West Covina is not the only local business buzz going on.

Industry, for instance, has seen a rise in the number of business-use permits, and officials are talking about plans for a new Lucky Strike Bowling Alley moving into the Puente Hills Mall.

Locally, Kohl's department store plans to move into the former Mervyns stores in Whittier and Monrovia.

Even some car dealerships, such as Honda in West Covina, are revamping or opening anew. Citrus Valley KIA recently had a grand opening in Covina.

Is it a sign that the bad economy - which last year ate up retailers such as Mervyns, Circuit City and Linens `N Things is - is turning around?

The verdict is still out, economists say. But it's reason for hope.

Consumer confidence picked up in the last quarter, and companies may be looking to gain

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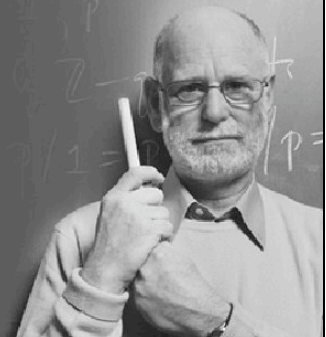


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marketshare that once belonged to now-defunct players, such as Circuit City, said Brad Kemp, director of regional research for Beacon Economics, which analyzes local economic development.

The activity also means that many retailers who survived the now year-and-a-half-long recession are gearing up for after the slump.

"L.A. is going to be there once the recession is over," Kemp said.

And the local market represents a huge pool of customers who will be more willing to open their wallets for retailers, Kemp said.

But economists weren't saying a turn-around is here.

In some cases, some large retailers' move-ins have been on the planning list for up to two years, said Jack Kyser, founding economist of the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corp.

Expansions just happen to come at a time when it might not be expected, given the economy, Kyser said.

"Now people are just scratching their heads," Kyser said.

Still, the down economy remains a chance for the survivors to get ready for life after the recession.

Kemp is seeing signs of hope for that life,

beyond retail activity.

"Builders are getting excited ... there's some light at the end of the tunnel," he said, adding that he's seeing commercial and residential builders buying others. "They are feeling like good times are yet to come and we are going to be poised to take advantage of that recovery."

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