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Les Cohen looks to the future for the shopping center his father built in the 1970s. As president of Cohen Development Co., Cohen has devised an ambitious remodeling plan to revitalize Westlake Shopping Center off Sterling Avenue. At right is one of two towers that will anchor the middle of the shopping center. Regency Beauty Institute has rented the tower and nearby space and will open a beauty college with state-of-the-art beauty services June 19. Other new tenants also are coming to Westlake.

## A new vision for Westlake

Redevelopment to feature a new-classical/Tuscan theme

BY ANITA SZOKE  
OF THE JOURNAL STAR

PEORIA — Some big changes are in the works for Westlake Shopping Center.

Cohen Development Co., the center's owner, is embarking on an ambitious, multi-million dollar remodeling project to redevelop and reposition Westlake as an upscale shopping plaza with

a neo-classical/Tuscan theme, imported Italian granite and sandstone accents and new storefronts.

Several new retailers are also calling Westlake home, including Regency Beauty Institute, one of the nation's fastest-growing schools of beauty and cosmetology that will anchor the center's new Main Street; Chevy's Fresh Mex, a Mexican restaurant; and Mickie's Pizzeria.

Beef O'Brady's, a family-oriented sports restaurant and pub, opened earlier this month.

Les Cohen, president of Cohen Development Co., envisions a more open and vibrant center with raised storefront elevations, new sidewalks and landscaping, a new Main Street area with large sidewalk patio cafes and public areas, and a seasonal farmer's market.

The renovations are estimated to cost more than \$5 million, or about the original cost of construction of the shopping center in 1974, Cohen said.

"The renovation has been designed to improve the customer experience,

to open up the tenant storefronts, and provide even more convenient access and parking," Cohen said.

### Knocking down the '70s

Built in the early 1970s, Westlake has more than 200,000 square feet of retail and a 140-room Marriott hotel built in 1999. It is anchored by Circuit City, the Guitar Center, Toys R Us, Regency Beauty Institute — which will open in mid-June — along with 10

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“Westlake overlooks what should become the busiest retail intersection in Peoria.”

Les Cohen

**WESTLAKE**

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local retail shops and several specialty restaurants, including Panera Bread, Ruby Tuesday, Beef O’Brady’s, The Q Smokehouse, Chuck E Cheese’s, Sushigawa, Chevy’s Fresh Mex, which will open in July, and Mickie’s Pizza, which will open in September.

When built in the 1970s, the center’s design and layout served it well, but now it’s time for change, Cohen said. “We don’t have to do this. We’re doing this because we want to and because we believe it will help us reposition the center in the market,” he said.

If Cohen had his druthers, he would have revamped Westlake years ago when he took over leadership in Cohen Development. But he was hindered by old, long-term leases, he said.

“We were held back by old leases that we had to wait to expire or we purchased,” he said.

Shuttered vacant buildings near the center, such as the old Denny’s restaurant and the former Burger King site on Sterling, have other owners and aren’t owned by Cohen Development. But Cohen hopes interest will be sparked by the remodeling so other retailers will opt to locate there.

**Revamp highlights**

The renovation is in its second phase. Ancient Italian granite called Porphyry — some fossils can even be seen in the stone — are imported from Italy and will border the sidewalks, Cohen said. Canyon Creek Sandstone from Oklahoma with Wisconsin limestone accents will blend new neo-classical facades with the original Westlake “rawhide” brick.

The old mansard sidewalk roof canopies from the 1970s are being torn down to make way for neo-classical/Tuscan facades, Cohen said. That design will unify the majority of the architecture of the shopping center, he added.

The new signage and graphics tower entrance for the Regency beauty school, which will occupy the former Westlake Cinema 1, reaches 43 feet, making it visible from I-74, Cohen said. The Regency Tower will be the first of two towers planned for the shopping center.

“The new open and heightened storefronts will be dramatic and tall enough to be read when driving westbound on I-74, while exiting the new interstate off-ramp, and when exiting the Northwoods Mall main entrance,” he said.

The center also will have wider sidewalks, improved drive lanes, new entrances and exits for pedestrians and more landscaping. A 40-foot colonnade and re-designed landscaping will improve the front entrance, Cohen said. And two pylon signs will be installed; one near Sterling Avenue, the other overlooking I-74.

A new open and brightly lit area, Main Street, is planned at the center. A 34-car parking lot, landscaped islands and public area and sidewalk cafes will occupy what once was an island between two buildings.

The Main Street area could feature special events and music and a seasonal farmer’s market is planned for the back of Main Street.



ARTIST RENDERING COURTESY OF LES COHEN

The old pedestrian courtyard that led to a movie theater and a variety of other shops at Westlake Shopping Center is being transformed. Shoppers will soon be able to park in front of their favorite stores and enjoy outdoor dining at two new restaurants.



LESLIE RENKEN/JOURNAL STAR

Les Cohen points out one of the fossils in a porphyry paver running along the front of Westlake Shopping Center. The Italian granite pavers, popular in Southern California, are one of several luxury features Cohen is incorporating into the shopping center renovation.

**Interstate shopping center**

Cohen said he considers Westlake a “regional community shopping center” with some lifestyle center components, such as the specialty restaurants and retailers, while at the same time offering products from big box stores.

He said Westlake has the highest retail and hospitality concentration within one mile, with more than 300 retailers, more than 65 restaurants and 11 hotels, in the Peoria market.

“Unlike some of the suburban centers, we’re not on a retail island, nor are we only a destination,” he said. “We are in the center of the city and in the center of the larger metropolitan market.”

The newly widened Sterling Avenue and the Sterling I-74 off-ramp have improved access for Westlake and Northwoods Mall

across the street, Cohen said.

Also, with the owners of Northwoods Mall, the Simon Property Group, investing \$6.5 million to upgrade Northwoods, the timing is right to remodel Westlake, Cohen said.

“With the new Interstate 74 repositioning, we have great confidence in the future of this

center,” Cohen said. “Westlake is now the only open air shopping center in Peoria, or on the western side of the Illinois River, immediately adjacent to Interstate 74.”

**Retail expanding**

The Peoria market has had more new retail opportunities than ever, with the opening of Peoria’s second major mall, The Shoppes at Grand Prairie, and with more new retailers locating here. Is that impacting Westlake?

“Certainly it has and it will,” Cohen said. “But that’s why you have to reposition yourself and logically provide a source of service to the community. You need to find a complimentary fit and niche in the market.”

In fact, the shopping center industry is in the midst of change resulting from consumers’ changing preferences and behavior and intensified competition, according to The Urban Land Institute Shopping Center Development Handbook. That creates opportunities shopping center owners and developers can take advantage of, the handbook states, with redevelopment, repositioning, re-tenanting and reconfiguration becoming the major forces in the industry today.

Cohen is optimistic about Westlake’s future.

“When the last dust of the Sterling-I-74 interchange construction clears this autumn, we believe the majority of traffic once concentrated on War Memorial, the highest traffic counts in the city, will permanently shift to Sterling,” he said. “Westlake overlooks what should become the busiest retail intersection in Peoria.”

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**Regency leads list of tenants**

BY ANITA SZOKE OF THE JOURNAL STAR

PEORIA — Several new tenants plan to locate at Westlake Shopping Center this summer.

The Regency Beauty Institute will open a new campus at the center June 19. The institute will offer beauty and cosmetology education along with salon services open to the public.

The school will anchor Westlake’s new Main Street, occupying the former Westlake Cinemas.

“With our Midwest roots and an established presence in Aurora-Naperville and Darien, this is a natural extension for Regency,” said Hayes Batson, Regency’s CEO. “We are excited to expand our presence in Illinois by building attractive facilities that mirror upscale salons and providing high-quality education that benefits our students, the local salon community and the public.”

Regency has grown from two Minnesota campuses in 2002 to 17 campuses in six states.

“We are working to build a national network of campuses and placement relationships so that our graduates are recognized and sought after throughout the United States,” Batson said.

Mickie’s Pizzeria plans to open a second restaurant at Westlake in September. Owner Dave Flowers, who owns the Mickie’s Pizzeria in North Pekin, said the 4,000-square-foot restaurant at Westlake will seat about 130 people, a little larger than in North Pekin, and have a private room for 30 to 40 people for parties and meetings.

With the new off-ramp and a cluster of anchor restaurants that complement each other, Westlake is the ideal location for the business’ first expansion into Peoria, Flowers said.

“With the new exit going in, that’s going to be the hottest location in Peoria and we’re excited about it,” Flowers said.

Chevys Fresh Mex, an independent Mexican restaurant chain based in Emeryville, Calif., will open in July or August, said a Chevys spokesman. Founded in 1986, Chevys is a privately owned chain that operates 123 restaurants in 16 states. It makes everything on its menu fresh daily, and there are no cans in a Chevys kitchen, according to its Web site.

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