

It's a Sterling effort
Businesses along Sterling Avenue can't wait for I-74 dust to finally settle.



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Vic Lombardi, right, manager of Guitar Center, demonstrates a guitar and amplifier for customer Doug Kruzan at the store in the Westlake Shopping Center in Peoria. The reconstruction of Interstate 74, which includes new on- and off-ramps for Sterling Avenue, was a key to Guitar Center's decision to put a store at Westlake last year.

A Sterling effort

Businesses near Northwoods Mall take traffic jams in stride, waiting for I-74 work to wrap

BY ANITA SZOKE
OF THE JOURNAL STAR

PEORIA — Commercial businesses along Sterling Avenue can't wait for the dust to settle this fall from construction of the Interstate 74 interchange.

Finally, shoppers will have easy access to and from businesses like Northwoods Mall, Westlake Shopping Center and others along Sterling that have endured months of obstacles associated with Upgrade 74, the largest highway improvement project in downstate history.

"This will be a great thing for us and for customers," said Bob Schertz, director of marketing at Northwoods.

The new Sterling interchange will open a direct and convenient interstate path to the mall and allow traffic to be better spread among the mall's three entrances, Schertz said.

It also opens quicker I-74 access for Westlake Shopping Center, said Les Cohen, president of Cohen Development Co., which manages Westlake.

"We think the best days are ahead of us," Cohen said.

Eastbound on- and off-ramps at Sterling are scheduled to open in October, while westbound ramps will be ready for traffic in mid-November — just in time for holiday shoppers.

"We believe the majority of traffic once concentrated on War Memorial Drive, which has the highest traffic counts in the city, will permanently shift to Sterling," Cohen said. "Westlake overlooks what should become the busiest retail intersection in Peoria."

Losses along the way

Although most businesses along Sterling weathered the construction barricades, others were not so lucky.

Outback Steakhouse inside Westlake closed this year because of lagging

sales attributed to the construction.

"(The steakhouse) was a casualty of the Sterling Avenue construction," Cohen said. "We lost several smaller, weaker stores (inside the center), but the strong have survived. Since the Sterling Avenue construction was completed, all of the stores have recovered, and many are doing better than they ever have."

Westlake has 16 tenants, with three empty spaces for lease, including the former Outback location. Cohen said there's been "a high level of interest" from businesses to locate inside the center.

Ken Kouri, who owns Kouri's Pub, remains wary. He said his decades-old business along Sterling lost about 40 percent of its parking during the widening of Sterling to six lanes. At the height of construction last year, he considered moving.

Although business has picked up since that construction ended, Kouri remains unsure about his pub's future.

"We don't know what we're going to do," he said. "I like the location, but parking is an issue."

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Good times ahead

Other businesses are more optimistic about benefits the Sterling interchange will bring.

For Guitar Center, which opened at Westlake in August, the location and new interstate design were significant selling points.

"It's a logical thing to put us right near the off-ramp," said Victor Lombardi, general manager of Guitar Center. "This is a great plaza, and the location is fabulous."

Customers from the Quad Cities, Bloomington and Springfield already trek to Guitar Center, Lombardi said, but the new interchange will greatly improve accessibility and increase business.

Road work hasn't deterred customers at Ferdinand's Wigs, which has operated in various Peoria locations for 42 years, the last 15 at 4325 N. Sterling.

"It wasn't really all that bad for our little business," owner Myrna Hawkins said. "Our customers have found their way in. We hardly missed a beat."

She's optimistic the new interchange will provide a more convenient route for all businesses in the area.

"The access will be so easy for customers," she said.

Tom Tour, manager of the J.C. Penney store inside Northwoods Mall, agrees: "It will be good for us. We're looking forward to the ramp coming in."



MATT DAYHOFF/JOURNAL STAR

Guitar Center is one of several businesses in Westlake Shopping Center that hope to benefit from the I-74 overhaul, with new ramps onto Sterling Avenue making them more visible from the interstate.

Other renovations

Coinciding with the road work, both Northwoods and Westlake are in the midst of large renovations of their own.

Northwoods will undergo a \$6.5 million renovation this year, the first in its 31-year history, including new dining options, lighting, flooring, paint, enhanced landscaping and a resurfaced parking lot.

Westlake has begun a \$3 million renovation, which includes new storefronts that will rise up over the interstate in full view of motorists below.

"They'll all be tall enough to be easily read from the new interstate off-ramps," Cohen said.

Other changes include new roofs, neo-classical facades and large swaths of sidewalk and drive lanes being replaced with landscaping.

"We're renovating to improve the customer experience," Cohen said. "There are excellent new shopping centers in our market. (But) none of the other locations have as much commercial density," he said, citing more than 300 retailers, 65 restaurants and 11 hotels within one mile.

"And none (of the other centers) will have dedicated I-74 access to the main arterials of the city," he said.