

Darby Borough feels rejuvenated by strip center

Key ingredient Save-A-Lot is the first supermarket in the town in 30 years

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DARBY BOROUGH — A new shopping center is giving new life to a Delaware County borough.

Darby Town Center, at 150 S. MacDade Blvd., is a 142,000-square-foot shopping center anchored by Save-A-Lot supermarket — the borough's first supermarket in 30 years.

"I was walking to the doctor today and I saw three young men carrying grocery bags. It's been a long time since we had that," said Darby Mayor Helen Thomas. "I've lived here 50 years and we always used to have supermarkets, but all of a sudden it wasn't there any more. It was like someone snatches something from under you."

The shopping center officially opened in



Murray

December with the opening of the Save-A-Lot, the borough's only supermarket, but leasing agent Mike Murray of Conshohocken-based Metro Commercial Real Estate Inc. said they are still adding tenants. Retailers that have either opened recently or will open include a

Deal\$ store, Dollar Tree, Hair World, Pop-eye's, a Chinese restaurant and a laundromat.

The center, which is expected to add 185 jobs, was built at a cost of \$10.3 million and replaces a long-vacant strip center.

"This was basically an empty lot for a long time," said Zachary Scott, manager of the month-old Hilldale Kitchen in the center.

Prior to the Save-A-Lot, residents had to go to nearby Glenolden or Yeadon for groceries — often passing the empty center on the way.

"It was just an old abandoned building, vacant. It was doing nothing for our town," Janice Davis, who is Darby's council president, said.

Darby's slide reflected that of some other parts of Delaware County, west of



PETER VAN ALLEN/BUSINESS JOURNAL



DENVER ARCHITECTS

Darby Town Center on MacDade Boulevard is fast becoming what its name implies. At Hilldale Kitchen manager Zachary Scott tosses some pizza dough.



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Zachary Scott
Hilldale Kitchen

Philadelphia.

The county had its largest period of growth between the World Wars and peaked in 1970, at 600,000. Between 1990 and 2000, Darby was among the hardest hit areas in the county, with its population declining by 9 percent to the current 9,963, according to the U.S. Bureau of Census. Household income in 2009 averaged \$34,138, well below the state average of \$49,520, according to City-Data.com.

A land-use and growth management analysis done by Peco Energy Co. in 2005 showed that Delaware County lost residents from "first generation suburbs" as they migrated to outer suburbs. Some of the older towns in Delaware County get

overlooked by shopping center developers, who are looking for areas with new development and often need large parcels for shopping centers and parking.

Darby had an added burden, said Davis.

Many of the businesses in the low-lying area of Darby had been devastated by flooding from Tropical Storm Floyd, in September 1999. Many stores never reopened.

"That had a real impact. It tore up all our businesses. We had 75 or 80 residents out of their homes. That took a lot out of Darby," said Thomas.

Worse, businesses were reluctant to open because of the nearby Darby Creek, which runs behind Darby Town Center

and is prone to overflowing its banks.

To mitigate potential problems, the developers created a massive drainage system under the shopping center. The shopping center's owner is MacDade-Darby Development Co., which is led by Patrick Burns, who also heads up Drexel Hill-based Fresh Grocer supermarkets. The redevelopment project was managed by Remington Group Inc. of Wayne. It was developed by Campus Apartments in University City. Construction was completed in 200 days.

Financing was led by the Redevelopment Fund in Philadelphia, leveraging federal new market tax credits. Developers also received a state Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program grant and a county environmental grant.

Before construction of Darby Town Center, Davis said the borough had been "reaching out for a long time," trying to interest developers and potential retailers.

"We're not finished yet," Davis added. "We still need businesses," including restaurants and food purveyors. ■