

Big Y open for business

PLAZA SHOWS OLD SAYBROOK A DESTINATION, OFFICIAL SAYS

By Luther Turmelle

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OLD SAYBROOK » First Selectman Carl Fortuna is hopeful that the completion of a new shopping center on Spencer Plain Road will be a catalyst for increased development in town.

Max's Place Shopping Center is still a work in progress, with only the new Big Y supermarket open for business. But with the 128,000-square-foot retail center's other major tenant, Kohl's Department Store, opening Sept. 21, Fortuna said he's confident the local economy will continue to improve.

"The economy has been improving little by little, but now we have a lot going on," Fortuna said at Thursday's grand opening of Big Y. "We believe that Old Saybrook is a destination."

General contractor F. William Brown of Norwich started construction of the \$9 million, 54,300-square-foot Big Y in March.

Two buildings at the front of the plaza remain under construction. They will house a variety of smaller retailers including a Supercuts hair salon, Ulta cosmetics and a Five Guys hamburger restaurant.

And the economic activity in

town is not limited to retail, Fortuna said. Yale-New Haven Hospital plans to open a new children's pediatric specialty center here early next year.

But Fortuna is mindful of the effort associated in bringing economic activity from the planning stages to completion. He noted that Big Y originally planned to open its Old Saybrook store a decade ago.

Developer Ron Lyman was piecing together 11 parcels of land he needed for the shopping center. But before the project could get underway, the recession hit and Big Y put its plans for the Old



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The new Big Y store in Old Saybrook opened recently.

Saybrook store on hold, said Charles D'Amour, president and chief operating officer of the Springfield, Massachusetts-based supermarket chain.

"We saw the storm clouds economically and decided it would be better to wait," D'Amour said. "And quite frankly, we were concerned we were going to be here all alone based on the tenants at the time. We didn't want to be part of a ghost town."

Once the recession came

to an end, Big Y resumed its strategy of opening one or two new stores a year. And Fortuna said town officials became determined to do whatever it took to help the supermarket chain make its plans a reality.

"We held special board (of selectmen) meetings, we even held a special town meeting," he said.

Lyman joked Thursday that fate had a funny way of working in his favor in terms of the impact it had on the shopping center.

"We actually came out of this with a stronger tenant mix," the Westbrook-based developer said. "The stores we've got now are going to be in it for the long haul and we were able to build when interest rates were better. But our plan originally called for Borders to join Big Y as the other major tenant and of course, they are not around anymore."

Now, Lyman is working on packaging another deal to develop what he

calls "Phase 2" of the Max's Place project. Based on the lands he's acquired thus far, it would include another 25,000 square feet of retail contiguous to the first phase of the shopping center.

"The challenge is educating real estate directors of these chains about shopping patterns here," Lyman said. "They are from out-of-state and they don't know that Old Saybrook is a retail center for the area."