

Mall branches out with new offerings

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ALTON - Alton Square has been recognized as the River Bend Growth Association Business of the Month for November.

"I like the fact that (the RBGA) takes a regional approach to things. It is a regional group and I think that is really important," said Lori Ehlers, general manager for the mall. "It is a great way to network and they really try to meet the members' needs."

Since opening its doors in 1978, Alton Square has become an icon of the area. Purchasing the property from Simon Property Group Inc. in 2007, Coyote Management LP of Addison, Texas, has worked to revitalize the struggling combination of retail stores, restaurants and community services.

"There is a lifestyle center component for certain areas that tends to work when you have a broader population base along with a somewhat affluent base," Ehlers said. "Coyote has really honed in on that. They work with malls in middle markets."

Ehlers has served as general manager since July 2005. She has extensive experience with mall management, including serving as manager at St. Clair Square.

"You do not see a lot of malls being built right now, but existing malls tend to have the best real estate in town," she said. "Malls are here to stay. They are not a dying breed."

Extensive renovations last year included a new HVAC system, new double-pane skylights in the center court, new flooring and an extensive expansion of Hayner Public Library.

"We have a library here," Ehlers said. "That is unusual (for a mall) and a nice service for the community."

This fall also boasts several new exciting features. The Eagles Nest children's play area opened last August, offering soft flooring, comfortable seating for parents, a hopscotch floor and dance area for older children. Located in the spot where Hardee's once stood, the area is open yet isolated enough to ensure keeping tabs on children is easy.

"We named it the Eagles Nest because we wanted to recognize the area and give it a local flavor," Ehlers said. "It gave us a theme to work with."

Birthday parties also can be held in the play area. Party packages include meals from Olga's Kitchen, Amarillo Steakhouse or the Cookie Factory as well as a visit from Edgar the Eagle. Mommy and Me programs, held every Wednesday morning, offer story time and crafts.

The library expansion and addition of a children's area shows Alton Square focusing on more activities to involve and encourage community participation.

"Coyote is more event-oriented," Ehlers said. "We had our first bridal fair last February. We also have fashion shows, youth activities and health fairs. Some of these things we have done all along, but Coyote has really encouraged us to continue that avenue. It is a good way to stay involved with the community."

Holiday activities include choir concerts, gift card promotions, and a Children's Charity ornament contest, where children can pick up a foam ornament from customer service, decorate it and turn it in to be displayed for voting. One dollar from every ornament will go to Oasis Women's Center.

Ehlers said although the trend of retail in malls is shifting, there still are many exciting shops to visit, including the newly expanded Maurices on the first floor.

"The Internet has really impacted retail in general," she said. "We have seen that with items like books and music. I think less so with apparel, because people still want to try on clothes and shoes. People still like to shop and meet other people, and the physical building still provides something you cannot get online.

"When you have a mall in an area like Alton, you become the town square of yesteryear. The mall serves a myriad of functions. There is retail, choice of restaurants, a chance to socialize, a play area for children and the space for walkers."

Upcoming plans for the mall include new paint, exterior landscaping, and the J and W's Plain Ol'e Kitchen restaurant on the upper level.

Ehlers said plans for a new 10-screen digital movie theater still are in discussion.

"The theater is still on the table and still in the works," she said. "Because of the state of the finance and lending industry right now, it is difficult to make that happen just now. We have a theater that is still interested and I have no doubt it is going to happen."

On Dec. 18 a Pet Photo Night will be held from 5 until 8 p.m., with a portion of the proceeds going to the 5A's animal aid society. Alton Square also hosts monthly adopt-a-pet events for the 5A's.

Ehlers said she is looking forward to a bustling and inspiring end to a challenging year for businesses everywhere.

"The economy is looking up," she said. "I am hopeful. Going into the holiday season, that is good to hear."