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## Walnut Hill Plaza owner seeking grocery store, family entertainment



A Miami-based company that purchased Walnut Hill Plaza in June said a grocery store, family entertainment and medical offices are among the potential tenants they hope to target for the shopping complex's vacant space. (Breeze photo by Lauren Clem)

By **LAUREN CLEM**, Valley Breeze Staff Writer

**WOONSOCKET** – The new owners of Walnut Hill Plaza are seeking to revitalize one of the city's largest shopping centers and hope a grocery store, family entertainment and medical offices might be keys to filling the long underused space.

Out of the Box Ventures, a division of Miami-based Lionheart Capital, acquired the plaza in June for \$5.7 million, according to city property records. The purchase is the latest transaction to impact the 300,000-square-foot shopping plaza on Diamond Hill Road that has seen high turnover of tenants in recent years.

Ashley Thornburg, director of retail operations for Lionheart Capital, told *The Breeze* the company is currently in talks with potential tenants and is looking to secure a new anchor tenant prior to determining its plan for upgrading and modernizing the plaza's retail space.

"We are in the process of determining what the redevelopment plan would be for the shopping center," she said. "A big piece of that is trying to create some renewed anchor interest in the space that was vacated by Sears. We'd like to see a grocery store ... so obviously a grocery tenant is at the top of our list."

Shaw's, the last grocery store located in the plaza, closed its doors in 2013. Thornburg said the company is looking at a range of potential grocery tenants, from large chains to local operators to more boutique-type stores.

Another priority for the company, she said, is bringing more family entertainment to the complex, with a movie theater high on the list. With a bowling alley and a trampoline park already located within the plaza's boundaries, Thornburg said a movie theater would round out the plaza's offerings as a center for recreation and bring smaller food and beverage-type tenants in its wake.

"We feel that securing one of two anchor tenants would really help spur the leasing on the small shop side once we're able to stabilize the shopping flow of the center because a lot of the food and beverage follows right behind those anchor leasing efforts," she said.

A third potential use, she said, would be medical, with an urgent care facility or medical offices also on the list of targeted tenants.

The plaza's previous owner, Walnut Hills LLC, purchased the property in 2014 for \$13 million, according to city property records. Since then, Sears, the plaza's longstanding anchor tenant, closed its doors in February 2017 as part of a corporate downsizing and Ocean State Job Lot relocated to the former Walmart building across the street. New tenants have also moved into the plaza, including Aero Trampoline Park and Planet Fitness, which relocated from nearby Woonsocket Plaza last year.

With about half its retail space currently vacant, Walnut Hill Plaza, along with two other large retail complexes on Diamond Hill Road, has struggled to compete with North Smithfield's Dowling Village in recent years. According to Thornburg, however, the company has experience bringing back plazas with high vacancy rates. She pointed to a property the company acquired in Williamsburg, Virginia, in 2016 that has since increased from 30 percent to 75 percent vacancy, largely due to the securing of a lease with anchor tenant Big Lots.

"The company is really focused on identifying distressed retail assets," she said.

After securing anchor tenants, the company plans to look at upgrading the plaza's aging retail space, said Thornburg. While she declined to name any of the businesses Lionheart Capital is targeting for the plaza, she said the company is currently in talks with potential tenants and suggested an announcement might be forthcoming in the next several months if all goes according to plan.

"My hope is that we can announce something very soon, but we'll have to see how the negotiations evolve," she said.