

by Greg Markley

Political Writer

Imagine you are a businessman, and you see the equivalent of every resident of Opelika, or nearly 28,000 people based on 2010 Census figures, traveling by your store every day. At the former Midway Plaza, this high volume of traffic has not always been as steep as today, as our area has steadily grown in population. But the shopping center was popular because it featured a variety of retail stores and a now-closed movie theater.

Midway Plaza itself has a new name, Saugahatchee Square, and its new owner aims to get most or all of the 206,000 square feet of prime retail space at 3700 Pepperrell Parkway rented. Michael Fimiani, president of Fimiani Development Corporation, has high hopes for the complex he purchased last year.

"We seek to completely change the image of this shopping center, and the name change is just part of that," said Fimiani, based in Boca Raton, FL. "We have had expansions of existing stores as well as new additions. Sears Hometown Store was a great addition, for example, and so is Unwired, which will relocate here within 60 days."

Fimiani was a founding partner of Woolbright Development in Boca Raton. Between 1999 and 2007, he was involved in 48 shopping center redevelopments that totaled more than \$1 billion in value. He has negotiated more than 1,000 lease transactions totaling 2,000,000 square feet. At the urging of two Auburn University graduates—his wife and his mother—Fimiani visited Lee County out of curiosity. He found the "local flavor" engaging and pro-business.

"Some other owners ripped me off but Mike Fimiani is honest, personable and fair," said Mark Fuller, owner of Sports Academy since 2004. "Mike has done a great job: People even come up

Opelika fixture Midway Plaza is out; 'Saugahatchee Square' arrives with renewed 'can-do' spirit

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to me to find out how they can be tenants here, too." Fuller spent 16 years as a college and professional baseball player and coached pitchers at Auburn University and North Carolina State University.

Sports Academy is located in a 15,000 square foot facility. Goodwill Industries has the largest space, at 27,752 square feet. Saugahatchee Square currently has space that ranges from 30,000 square feet to 3,000 square feet. Dollar General and Sears Home Store are among the well-known, national tenants. Most of the other 9 stores are locally-owned.

"The Fimiani team is thrilled to be here and we want Saugahatchee Square to be a centerpiece in Opelika," Mike Fimiani said. "When shopping centers don't succeed, even if in a good location like ours, it is because of poor management. But we have a very good onsite property manager here (Kari Pierce) and I am here every three weeks." He is impressed with and grateful to the many City of Opelika employees who have helped him get established here.