

# OPELIKA-AUBURN NEWS



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## RETAIL REVITALIZED



# 'The shining light'

Former Opelika shopping hub Midway Plaza makes comeback as Saugahatchee Square

Formerly Opelika's most-frequented shopping venue, Saugahatchee Square, first known as Midway Plaza has been rebounding under new ownership over the past three years.

BY KATHERINE HAAS  
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Before Tiger Town came to life as a retail giant in Opelika, there were trees, dirt and unoccupied earth. Before the Auburn Mall opened its doors, there was a dairy on the corner where the mall now stands and a nine-hole golf course behind it. And before Opelika's 14 downtown restaurants emerged, offering visitors to the historic district an overall culinary experience in addition to a meal, there were only two eateries in the whole town.

But before any of that, there was Midway Plaza.

"The shining light was Midway Plaza," said Opelika Mayor Gary Fuller. "At the time that it opened, it was a big, big deal."

Most of the 28,000 drivers that pass by the former Midway Plaza shopping center (now Saugahatchee Square) on Pepperell Parkway each day, according to the 2010 Census, do so naïve of the fact that the 210,000-square-foot retail space was once the most popular shopping venue in town. It wasn't just the most popular place to shop, however.

"It was the only place," explained the Rev. Loren Sutton, a longtime Opelika resident



Saugahatchee Square has seen several aesthetic enhancements since owner Mike Fimiani of Fimiani Development Corp. bought the shopping center just less than three years ago.

and pastor of Opelika's Airview Church.

Serving as the only major shopping center in town after it opened in 1966, Midway Plaza once flourished, offering high-end major retailers such as Belk and J.C. Penney, a Carmike movie theater and Kroger grocery store, as well as a list of local shops.

But when other shopping options such as Auburn's indoor mall came into existence, many of Midway Plaza's big names jumped at the opportunity to occupy the newest retail venue available, causing the former

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## Legislature

# Looking at a special session on Ala. budget

The Associated Press

MONTGOMERY — Alabama legislators are heading to a special session sometime this summer after arriving at an impasse over the state's general fund budget.

The session ended with a vetoed spending plan and plenty of finger-pointing over who was to blame. Getting a budget this summer will depend on something in short supply this spring: agreement.

"The Legislature was not ready to solve this in February. They were not ready. They have become more ready," Gov. Robert Bentley said.

Republicans control both the governor's office and a lopsided majority in both chambers of the Alabama Legislature. Being of the same party, however, did not shield state office holders from sharp disagreements on how to handle a \$200 million shortfall in the fiscal year that begins in October, and unfunded needs in prisons and Medicaid.

Bentley proposed \$541 million in new taxes, but his push was rejected by lawmakers. Senators one night debated a bill that would shift some funds from the better-funded education budget. However, senators said House members essentially killed the bill by adjourning early. House Republicans at one point backed a \$151 million tax package, but the bills didn't get a vote after



Bentley

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## Opelika

# Trinity Presbyterian Church's new facility nears completion

BY LINDY OLLER  
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Trinity Presbyterian Church on India Road in Opelika will soon have a new home after the loss of the church's former building two years ago.

Chris Duncan, pastor at TPC, said the construction of the new facility is on schedule. Site prep work began on the new facility in July, according to Duncan.

"We have a target date of moving in

the first Sunday in September," he said. "Things are on budget. We're very thankful."

Duncan said the former building was hit by a lightning strike July 13, 2013.

"The lightning strike caused a fire that resulted in the loss of the church building and our facilities," Duncan said. "It will be two years we have been worshipping in a temporary location at the

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TODD J. VAN EMST/OPELIKA-AUBURN NEWS

Construction of the new Trinity Church in Opelika, shown Saturday, is on schedule, according to pastor Chris Duncan. The former church building was struck by lightning in July 2013.



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## Weather

High: 90 Low: 69  
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# Square

From Page 1A

“shining light” to fade into the commercial landscape.

“Business strategists suggest that anything you build, I don’t care if you build a McDonald’s, every 10 to 15 years, you’ve got to refurbish,” Sutton said. “You’ve got to rehash or it somehow kind of loses its punch. I’ve just watched it.”

With the help of a new owner three years ago and city support, Midway Plaza, which was reborn as Saughatchee Square in 2012, has been able to do just that and is in the process of bouncing back from its retail rut.

“Now it’s on the rebound,” Fuller said.

## The plaza’s past

Patrons of Midway Plaza in its heyday remember it as a place where parents felt safe letting their children roam, and where people would be inclined to make their visits an

outing — complete with dinner, a movie and shopping — rather than just a trip to the store.

“It was a big-enough place that it wasn’t like there was just one store there or two stores there,” Sutton recalled. “You could spend all day shopping in there, depending on what you were trying to find.”

Sutton moved to Opelika — a place he described as a “sleepy little country town” at the time — shortly before Midway Plaza opened. Sutton said stores like Belk (then Belk-Gallant) and J.C. Penney “outshined” the other shopping options Opelika had at the time.

“It was the biggest thing Opelika and Auburn ever saw,” he said of J.C. Penney. “It was really a good place.”

In addition to the movie theater, Sutton remembers Midway Plaza boasting a Rose’s 5-and-10 cents store, a Kroger grocery store, barber-shops, a wedding shop, a Singer sewing-machine



TODD J. VAN EMST/OPELIKA-AUBURN NEWS

**Fifteen new businesses have become tenants at Saughatchee Square since Fimiani Development Corp. bought the center about three years ago. Sears moved to the center in January 2013, while Asian Supermarket, which came to Saughatchee Square in May 2012, has recently expanded to a larger location within the center. Pictured is Asian Supermarket’s former location.**

store, and a Bonanza Steakhouse, among other locally owned stores.

Fuller, who moved to Opelika from a small town north of Opelika, remembers coming to Opelika to shop at Midway Plaza before he permanently moved to the area.

“This was the big city at the time,” he said. “In ’74 when I came here, of course, Midway Plaza ... was very active, had a lot of great stores — there was a lot of retail going on.”

## Moving from Midway

Though Midway Plaza was once the only major place to shop in the Opelika-Auburn area, it would not stay that way for long.

Leaving Opelika’s outdoor shopping venue behind, Midway Plaza’s main attractions including Belk and J.C. Penney eventually moved to the Village Mall in Auburn (also once Colonial Mall and now Auburn Mall) after it opened in 1973. The Carmike Cinema at Midway Plaza also closed after Carmike Wynnsong opened in Auburn on East University Drive across from the mall.

“As some of the big anchor stores — primarily Penney’s and Belk — moved to the Village

Mall, then you saw the downturn of Midway Plaza, and it continued like that for a number of years,” Fuller explained.

He estimates that J.C. Penney and Belk moved to the mall in the early 1980s, a time when Opelika’s attempts to boost its shopping opportunities in the downtown district also found results less than desirable. A Montgomery Fair store, which became Gayfer’s and then Dillard’s, was originally in downtown Opelika and also made the move to the mall in Auburn.

“The city of Opelika, after that, kind of went south at Midway; downtown had already gone south,” Fuller said. “It was pretty pitiful.”

He added that while there were still good stores in Opelika, “there wasn’t the selection and weren’t the choices like you have in some of the big-box stores.”

## A retail renewal

Though Opelika faced a loss of commercial variety, the trend has reversed in the past few years as the city has welcomed many new names to its retail roster, several of those in what is now called Saughatchee Square.

Midway Plaza remained open after losing some of its biggest tenants and simultaneously losing its status as Opelika’s No. 1 shopping venue, facing competition from the mall, other nearby shopping centers such as Pepperell Corners and Tiger Town, which opened in 2004.

Three years ago, a new owner acquired Midway Plaza, and he has made it his mission to revitalize the center and provide more shopping options for area residents.

“It had been foreclosed on prior to me owing it and had fallen into disrepair,” said Mike Fimiani, president of Fimiani Development Corp. and owner of Saughatchee Square. “This created a

tremendous amount of vacancy.”

According to a May 2013 article by political writer Greg Markley published on fimiani.com, Fimiani, based in Boca Raton, Fla., was involved in 48 shopping center redevelopment projects between 1999 and 2007. Fimiani visited Lee County when urged to do so by his wife and mother, both Auburn University graduates.

“The Auburn-Opelika trade area with the combined attributes of the university, auto manufacturers, East Alabama Medical Center, makes it very attractive,” he said.

In addition to the name change, the renewal of the shopping center has involved several aesthetic improvements.

“We have redone the parking lot and added landscaped islands throughout the center to give the parking lot definition,” Fimiani said. “We replaced all of the lighting for the entire parking lot and in the rear of the center. We are replacing the pylon sign panels as each new tenant moves in.”

He added that the center has been repainted and new storefronts are being installed with new glass and doors as each tenant moves in.

Among the 26 total retailers at Saughatchee Square, 15 are new businesses that have moved into the center since Fimiani took ownership including Harbor Freight, Porter Paints, Guthrie’s and Sears.

Lake Martin resident Jeff Rothstein opened Sears in Saughatchee Square in January 2013. He also owns a Sears store in LaGrange, Ga.

“It’s really been interesting to watch a developer take a place that was run-down, tired, very vacant and just make a commitment to say, ‘We’re going to do what it takes to bring it back,’” Rothstein said.

“And he made the commitment, and now we’re just seeing the results.”

Rothstein, who said he believes Sears has helped play a part in bringing other businesses to the shopping center, added that Sears is expanding its assortment of merchandise to cater to a younger clientele.

“I would like to say ... (Fimiani) is a very, very good landlord. He has been very committed financially to renovating the shopping center, to making the improvements that we needed.”

While new businesses have come under the umbrella of Saughatchee Square, others, like the Asian Supermarket, have also expanded within the center.

Owned and operated by the Lin family, Asian Supermarket opened in May 2012. On May 1, the supermarket moved to a larger space in the center, boasting an extended Asian grocery selection, a live-fish-and-eafood market and an in-store restaurant featuring Korean and Chinese cuisine, dim-sum and hot pot.

Store manager Cherry Zou said the expanded store is off to a good start, and sales continue to increase.

“The business still is kind of growing, so I think it will be good,” she said, adding that she hopes the store will attract shoppers from Montgomery and Columbus “because they don’t have any Asian market sized like this.”

Fimiani said there is still retail space remaining at the center, and he is hoping that it will be filled by the end of the year. Free-standing banks or restaurants could eventually occupy the outparcels, according to Fimiani, who also is seeking small shop tenants for a planned multi-tenant building.

“The goal is to keep the center as close to 100 percent occupancy as possible and to provide a nice shopping environment for the residents of Opelika and Auburn,” he said. “It’s fun to see new businesses open and succeed. All of the tenants are doing well, and the foot traffic in the center has improved tremendously.”

As Saughatchee Square steps slowly back into the spotlight, its longtime supporters are appreciative for the efforts made to put it back on the map.

“I’m so grateful to Mike Fimiani for his belief in what Saughatchee Square could become,” Fuller said.

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## Church

From Page 1A

Cultural Center of East Alabama and going

through the process of rebuilding.”

Duncan explained what will be different about the new facility.

“The facility is larger square footage by about

20 percent,” Duncan said. “It’s a different style. The exterior style is what architecturally would be described as a Neo-Gothic style, which is unique. The former building was more of a Colonial-style building.”

Duncan spoke about how the church can progress from the loss.

“When we lost our old facility, which we had outgrown, this ironically put us in a position of being able to start from scratch and plan something that would adequately serve us for years to come,” Duncan said. “I think even though we went through a very devastating event, we’re going to be in a much better position in terms of our facilities for moving us forward and fulfilling our goals and vision as a church and giving us the space and the facilities to do that. We’re excited about what the future holds for the church.”

The church will hold a formal dedication service Sept. 20.

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