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McKenzie: Shopping center tenants play musical chairs

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Downtown is breaking out like chicken pox!

That's right, the latest and greatest in commercial and retail development schemes — creating that downtown feeling — is coming to Albemarle County and it's coming on strong.

“The current trend is toward creating a reimaging of the 1950s when you went downtown to do your shopping,” said Chris Engel, Charlottesville’s director of economic development. “Downtown used to be the hub for a region and where all of the department stores and services were located. Now we’re seeing regional commercial and retail projects, some with residential development as well, designed to serve area population centers.”

Once, strip-mall shopping centers — such as Barracks Road, Seminole Square, Shopper’s World and Albemarle Square, all lining U.S. 29 — were the developmental rage, said Mr. Engel and Mark Graham, community development director for Albemarle. Then came indoor malls — Fashion Square. Now, several “downtowns” are being planned.

Fifth Street Station is to be built at Fifth Street Extended and Interstate 64, and North Pointe Center, which will include retail, commercial and a bunch of homes near the University of Virginia Research Park, will someday be built.

Meanwhile, they’re building hundreds of thousands of square feet of commercial property and hundreds of homes at Hollymead Town Center, and the Shops at

Stonefield is adding several road lanes, a couple of stoplights, 370 apartment/townhomes and a couple thousand vehicle trips per day to the intersection of Hydraulic Road and U.S. 29.

And restaurants and stores are hopping from location to location like professional football teams shopping for stadium deals.

At Seminole Square, across from Stonefield, Cheeseburger in Paradise is out and the Outback Steakhouse is in. Outback, by the way, also owns the Hollymead Town Center's Bonefish Grill. Although leaving its Albemarle Square facility, rumor has it that one of several other restaurants owned by the chain will fill the spot. The Seminole Square folks sank the Boathouse Grill in favor of Mexican-joint chain Plaza Azteca, which will arrive soon.

At the same time, Pier 1 is leaving the Gardens for Stonefield and Blue Ridge Mountain Sports will migrate from Barracks Road to Stonefield, where the developer estimates that 61,000 vehicles pass by each day.

The almost-vacant section of Albemarle Square now anchored by Chandler's Bakery and the library will have a new Fresh Market grocery store to compete with a Wegmans grocery planned for Fifth Street Station and Stonefield's Trader Joe's, which is just up the street from the recently completed Whole Foods Market.

Meanwhile, the Giant grocery at Seminole Square has closed, sending shoppers to the Pantops store while Stein Mart takes over Shopper's World, the complex on U.S. 29 across from Fashion Square that formerly housed Whole Foods.

Rumor has it that a Costco or the like will go in next to the Wegmans at Fifth Street Station and it's for sure that Crate & Barrel and Pottery Barn will join the Hyatt Hotel chain, Burton's Grill and Langford Market in Stonefield, along with a Regal Cinema, Travinia Italian Kitchen, Williams-Sonoma and Pasture.

And while it may sound a lot like Laurel and Hardy doing "Who's on First," all of

this can be seen as a good thing. Mr. Engel said the new choices in retail and dining will help keep local money going into locally situated businesses, local workers' paychecks and local sales and meals tax coffers.

"People don't tend to put off getting what they want and, if they cannot find the shopping experience in the area, they will order it online or get in the car and drive to Northern Virginia," Mr. Engel explained. "We call that leakage; that's local money that's going elsewhere that could be captured in the local economy."

And, while we'll never be a truly metropolitan community without an Olive Garden, there's still hope of even those miracles happening.

"Retail follows rooftops," Mr. Engel said. "Companies sit down and look at the demographics and, when they think the time is right and there's enough of a customer base to support it, they'll come."

I bet you can almost taste those breadsticks now.