

## City Center next up for Nationwide Realty

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by [Brian R. Ball](#)

Business First

The landlord of the Columbus City Center mall has hired Nationwide Realty Investors Ltd. as its consultant in the redevelopment of the woebegone property.

Capitol South Community Urban Redevelopment Corp. has asked the real estate development arm of Nationwide Mutual Insurance Co. to advise the nonprofit agency on plans mall manager Mills Corp. and partner General Motors Pension Trust decide to pursue in the coming months.

"In order for (Mills and GM) to go forward, they'll need a lot of approvals from us and probably some participation by us in the property," said John Rosenberger, Capitol South's executive director. "To have the depth of field for those proposals, we've engaged (Nationwide Realty) as an adviser ... to make us a better partner for the owner of the center."

Hedging bets

The 1.2 million-square-foot mall has struggled for years, especially since the opening of the Mall at Tuttle Crossing near Dublin, Easton Town Center in northeast Columbus and Polaris Fashion Place in southern Delaware County.

Hard times for department stores in general have also taken their toll. City Center anchors Marshall Field's and Jacobson's have long since abandoned Columbus, while Federated Department Stores Inc. closed the adjacent Lazarus-Macy's store more than a year ago.

"Anyone paying attention to City Center is concerned about its distress and its future," Rosenberger said.

City Center received another blow in February, when Limited Brands Inc. said it planned to pull its Limited, Victoria Secret's Beauty and Express Men stores out of the 17-year-old mall. They were joined by American Eagle Outfitters, Lane Bryant and others that have left or plan to leave.

The departures have prompted speculation in real estate circles that Capitol South may have the keys to the mall returned to it. But Rosenberger said he expects a redevelopment plan from Mills, because the Mills-GM partnership, TL Columbus LLC, has kept up with its rent payments.

"As long as the lease is in good standing, they own the center," he said.

Rosenberger said hiring Nationwide Realty will help Capitol South should Mills call it quits.

"If the current owner decides not to go forward, in that event (Nationwide Realty) has agreed to become the quarterback, so there would not be a lapse in the efforts to redevelop the center," he said.

"We have no right to meddle in the management of the center," Rosenberger said. "The opportunity to redevelop it belongs to them."

Mills spokesman David Douglas said the company has no timetable for revealing its plans for what it will do with the mall.

"We continue to explore redevelopment and re-tenanting opportunities with our partner and other potential partners," he said. "It's a complex process. We want to make sure we get it right."

Bob McLaughlin, Columbus' downtown development administrator, said Mayor Michael B. Coleman sought Nationwide Realty's advice because of the potential for City Center to lose Mills as its operator.

"That's not what anyone desires," he said.

RiverSouth extension

Rosenberger said Nationwide Realty's role in vetting redevelopment scenarios comes as he prepares to leave the job he has held since 1983.

As a nonprofit organization, Capitol South has few resources to continue its involvement at City Center, he said.

"We're not very deep in our shop with people," he said, "so we have to swing into gear to accomplish some sort of transition, some sort of stability and continuity."

The entry of Nationwide Realty comes two months after the developer, best known for its creation of the Arena District, prepares to serve as a third-party development manager for residential and commercial development in downtown's RiverSouth district not far from City Center.

Columbus Downtown Development Corp., another agency affiliated with the city, wants Nationwide Realty to direct construction on former Lazarus parking lots along South Front between Town and Rich streets. The agency acquired the lots from Federated along with the department store, which is being rehabilitated.

"This (role at City Center) is a logical extension for the responsibility (Nationwide Realty) has in RiverSouth," McLaughlin said.

Nationwide Realty President Brian Ellis agreed with the comment.

"What's happening with City Center is going to be important to RiverSouth, and what happens to RiverSouth will be important to City Center," Ellis said. "This gives us the opportunity to become familiar with what's going on."

Rosenberger said Nationwide Realty has taken on a difficult task.

"We want to be able to act on proposals on an expedited basis," he said. "Brian will have to roll up his sleeves and get real smart about a very complicated property."