



South Hills Mall & Plaza advertises itself with a controversial sign that sits near the intersection of I-40 and 440.

PHOTO BY RAY BLACK III

ROLLING ALONG SOUTH HILLS

46 years since its grand opening, South Hills shopping center signs another big tenant

BY VICKIE JEAN DEHAMER
STAFF WRITER

David Martin bought the land along I-40 that became South Hills Mall over 50 years ago. He started with one 50,000 square-foot building on the 78-acre plot. The deal set him back 3 cents a square foot, or about \$1,200 an acre.

"Now I've been offered a million an acre," said Martin, 81.

But he's not selling. In fact, he continues to sign new tenants to the cluster of brick buildings, built in stages from the late 1960s to now. Furniture 4 Less, a large discount furniture store, signed a lease July 27 and plans to open a 70,000 square-foot megastore around Labor Day. Martin also has sketches for a future 64-story office building, sitting atop a six-deck parking garage.

He is like a man trying to keep 100 pots hot on a one-burner stove.

Martin claims South Hills was the first mall in Cary. The idea came to him in 1959, from the then-manager of Belk's department store in Raleigh.

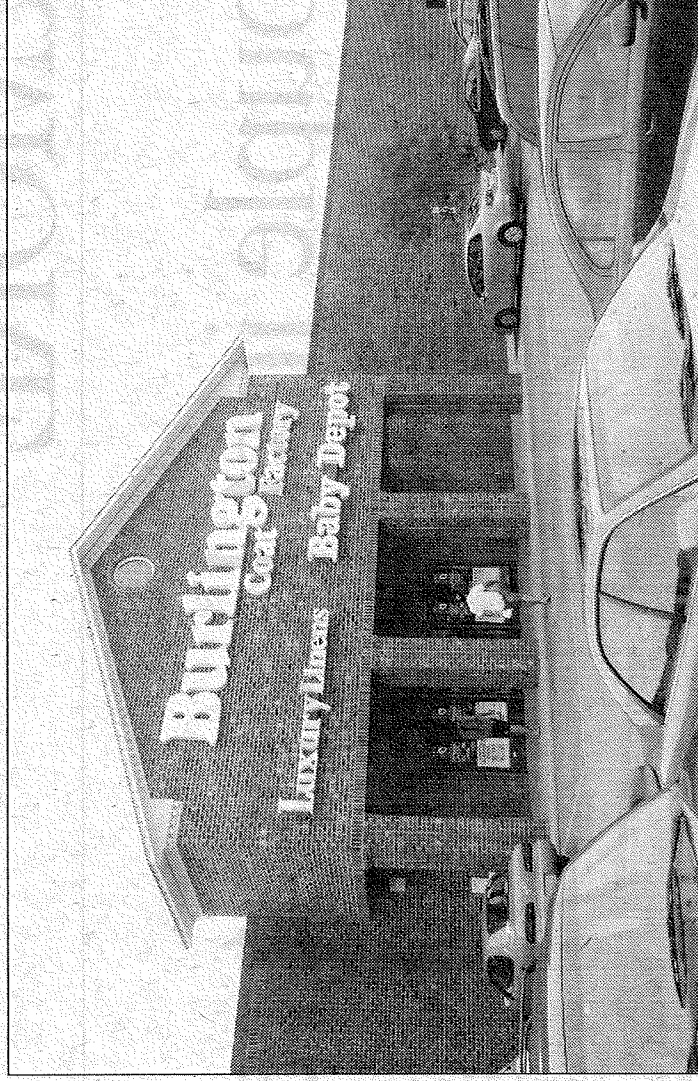
"Raymond Morgan, in a fancy hat — he was a dapper-looking guy — motioned me over," Martin remembers of the day in front of the First Baptist Church of Cary. "He said, 'David, Cary's beginning to grow and someone should build a shopping center out there.'"

Martin, a jack-of-all-trades who took a keen interest in developing land, had a



Bob Dascombe confers with David Martin during an auction in 2005.

NEWS & OBSERVER FILE PHOTO



Burlington Coat Factory is in the north section of the mall, which was added in 1985.

PHOTO BY RAY BLACK III

SOUTH HILLS

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years to keep up. The one thing it's always had going for it, according to Bob Dascombe, senior vice president of Martin Properties, is its location and age. Tri-angle commuters can't miss it on I-40, and it seems like it's been around forever. And so, of course, has David Martin.

"He was here before I-40 was here," said Dascombe, who's been Martin's business partner and son-in-law for the last 20 years. They also live across the street from each other. "He's the sole owner of this property. He built it himself."

In 1985, Martin added the north section of the mall, where Burlington Coat Factory stands today. In 1998, K&S Cafeteria was built — a restaurant that fell into Martin's Christian vision of home cooking without alcohol.

"We didn't really force any tenants out; we relocated some," Dascombe said. "We did it in stages and phases so we could work with tenants and work with lease terms. It's kind of like a Rubik's cube — a lot of twisting and turning."

Some stores left; some welcomed the change. Grand Asia Market, which opened in 1997, grew from 7,000 square feet to 30,000 when it moved. Michael's moved to Crossroads and was replaced by Northern Tool and Equipment. South Hills Emporium, Actionwear Dancers Shop and Mitchell's Hair Academy all hightailed it to the Plaza at South Hills, adjacent to the main center on Buck Jones Road.

Six years later, does Dascombe think all this reshuffling was ef-

fective? Mostly, yes.

"Sure, there are folks who had been here years ago, if they hadn't been here in a while, who say, 'I can't get in where I used to,'" Dascombe said. "[But] we are best described as a collection of destinations."

Some of the mall's interior remained. Called The Shops at South Hills, oldies like N.C. License and Title, Tom's Train Station and Carolina Sunglasses' kiosk still pepper the wide corridor, leading to the entrance of Martin Properties, where Dascombe and Martin have side-by-side offices and balconies that oversee the entire floor.

And there's another oldie that will remain, as long as Martin has any say in the matter: the big sign by the freeway. It's one of two re-

maining "billboards" in Cary that the town considers illegal.

Martin said he's not worried about any fines the town may hold him to while he ignores the mandate to tear it down.

"He's got his own opinions on it," said Dascombe of the dispute. "My goal has been to encourage them to try to get together and work out some middle ground."

Asked why he's fighting it, he points to a scar on his arm, one he received when he was 75, chasing a purse snatcher in Raleigh. The younger man bit him and Martin said he responded with a "knuckle sandwich."

He said he doesn't intend to back down this time either.

"I don't intimidate easy," he said. "They can drop it anytime."

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SOUTH HILLS MALL TIMELINE

MID-1960S

David Martin built the first building, 50,000 square feet. He believes it was the first shopping center built between Raleigh and Greensboro.

1972

Martin builds the south portion of South Hills Mall, where Grand Asia Market stands.

1985

North section added, where Burlington Coat Factory is today.

1998

K&S Cafeteria added.

2003

Kerr Drugs moves from original mall to new free-standing building.

De-malling in full effect, shuffling 30 smaller stores from the interior of the mall into 5 larger spaces along the exterior.