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Tuesday, May 31, 2005

[NEWS](#)

[NEWS](#) [COMMUNITY](#) [BUSINESS](#) [SPORTS](#) [A&E](#)
[OPINION](#) [JOBS](#) [AUTOS](#) [REAL ESTATE](#) [CLASSIFIEDS](#) [HELP](#)
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Region poised for retailer invasion

By LAUREN MAYK and KEVIN MCQUAID

lauren.mayk@heraldtribune.com

kevin.mcquaid@heraldtribune.com

Can Southwest Florida land Crate & Barrel?

Thanks to an influx of affluent baby boomers and other residents, increasing consumer confidence and a new appreciation of tourist spending habits, upscale merchants like the hip home furnishings retailer are considering the region for the first time.

"It's a market that's on the radar screen of a lot of retailers," said Dave Huntoon, director of client services for MapInfo, a research and consulting firm that helps retailers decide where to open stores.

In response, a bevy of developers -- with properties ranging from downtown Sarasota to a site at State Road 64 and Interstate 75 in Manatee County -- have proposed projects to capture high-end retail tenants.

Those retailers will shape Southwest Florida shopping for the next decade and beyond, and much of that future could be decided this week, three time zones away, in Las Vegas.

There, developers and merchants will collide in a frenzy of deal-making and bargaining that could fill some projects and leave others wanting.

Because even planned retail developments can take as long as two years to build, this year's International Council of Shopping Centers' annual gathering is likely to be especially meaningful.

Housed in a 30-acre temple to American capitalism, Las Vegas' mammoth convention center, the retail conference often serves as the place where merchants and developers link.

During the four-day event, 36,000 retail and development representatives will hit the convention center floor -- a crowd about twice the size of Venice's population.

To accommodate the throng, the center is laid out like a city grid, complete with street names.

Developers set up "booths" that are, in fact, offices, some featuring fragrant bakeries, or cafés, while at night, many double as cocktail lounges.

Some are incredibly elaborate, like the Simon Property Group's monster booth, which covers a full half-acre and serves as a landmark for navigating the floor.

While each developer peddling a project can list reasons why retailers should go in their shopping center, experts say the reality is Crate & Barrel and others like them will find the Sarasota-Bradenton area attractive -- but only for a single store.

That fact could touch off a heated competition among developers.

"I doubt Sarasota's going to support two Crate & Barrel stores," Huntoon said.

Peter Rusnak, Crate & Barrel's

Continued

1 | [2](#) | [3](#) | [4](#) | [5](#) | [Next >>](#)

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