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## Healthy spring crop of new leases at Plaza mall in Paramus

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Eight tenants recently signed leases to open stores and a restaurant at Westfield Garden State Plaza in Paramus, giving the state's largest mall one of its strongest rounds of spring leasing activity since before the recession began.

The Plaza is bucking a national trend of rising mall vacancies. In the first quarter of this year, the vacancy rate for the nation's enclosed malls reached 9.1 percent, according to real estate data firm Reis Inc., the highest mall vacancy rate in more than a decade. Before the recession began hitting retailers in 2008, the national mall vacancy rate stayed fairly stable, in the 5.5 percent range.

The Plaza avoided significant vacancies during the worst years, but retailers who previously had been clamoring for space in Paramus slowed their expansion plans during 2008 and 2009. However, last year major chains again began picking the Plaza as the place to introduce or expand their new concept stores.

About a dozen new retailers moved into the mall last year, including new-to-New Jersey brands such as Superdry and Affliction.

The latest round of new leases includes a number of leasing coups, such as the second Coach Men's store opened by Coach Inc. Coach Men's is a leather goods and clothing boutique launched by Coach last year in New York. The Coach Men's store, expected to open in late July or early August, will be 1,645 square feet.

That shop will be one of three stores that will move into a space near Nordstrom formerly occupied by a large Gap store. Gap is moving into a smaller space in that corner, making way for the Coach store and two other apparel retailers, Madewell and Aritzia.

Madewell, a women's denim and casual wear division of J. Crew, is taking a 3,461-square-foot space and is scheduled to open at the end of August. Aritzia, a Canadian women's clothing chain, will open in August at a 3,989-square-foot location.

Another new tenant is Karen Millen, a London-based upscale fashion chain with 15 stores in the United States, including one at The Mall at Short Hills.

One of the new tenants, Townhouse Kitchen & Bar, will replace a longtime fixture at the mall, the McDonald's located next to a mall entrance and near the mall carousel. The restaurant will have a

more upscale and grownup flavor than its fast-food predecessor, with a wine bar and cocktails, as well as a menu featuring "small plates" or appetizer-sized portions, as well as entrées.

The Plaza's biggest vacancy at the moment is the 23,700-square-foot space formerly occupied by the Borders bookstore, which closed in March as part of that chain's bankruptcy restructuring. Lisa Herrmann, regional director of marketing for Westfield, said the mall expects to announce a replacement tenant for that space soon.

Herrmann said the Plaza's leasing team tries to have new tenants lined up as spaces become available. The mall, she said, surveys customers about what stores and new concepts they want, and looks for tenants that work in the various "districts" in the mall, such as the youth district or the fashion district.

"As leases expire and as stores exit the center, we're two years ahead of the game," she said, "figuring out concepts that would work in these locations."

The Plaza has close to 300 retailers, including carts and kiosks, with 2.1 million square feet of store space.

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