



Residents tell Shores Villa Plaza owners they want Trader Joe's

By Stuart Korfhage
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The owner of the Shores Villa Plaza on U.S. 1 South is going right to the people in the area to find out what they want in the mostly vacant shopping center.

So far, the majority response has been: Trader Joe's, please.

Jacksonville-based development company Ash Properties owns the shopping center, and its marketing department is working to fill the biggest empty space, which is a 34,000-square-foot store. It once housed Food Lion, but the grocery chain pulled out of the entire region in 2012, closing 113 stores, including those in Clay, St. Johns, Nassau, Baker and Alachua counties.

Ash Properties vice president of marketing Tyrone Johnson said his company has been surveying residents near the shopping center to see what they prefer. A web poll (<https://ashproperties.com/community-vote-shores-village/>) gives participants options about which store they would prefer among: Walmart Neighborhood Market, Trader Joe's, Native Sun, Aldi or Lucy's Market.

"We wanted to take the approach with Food Lion being gone so long, (we are) trying to see: What would the community like out there?," Johnson said. "Looks like a lot of people are leaning toward Trader Joe's. That looks like the one that's the most popular right now.

"We're going to give everybody about another week to submit. Then we'll reach out to the grocery store chains and go from there."

Of course, there is no guarantee any store will sign a lease based on a poll, but it can at least show that the community is interested.

In the case of Trader Joe's, the company has close to 500 locations and recently moved into Northeast Florida. It opened a store on San Jose Boulevard in October 2017 and also has a store in Jacksonville Beach. An email to Trader Joe's about expanding to St. Johns County was not immediately returned.

It is expected that some retailer will find interest in the Shores Villa Plaza because that area is seeing strong residential growth. In addition to the Shores, which is well established, there are several residential developments in the Watson Road area and south of there.

Research from Ash Properties shows that the number of households in the area is estimated to change from 17,235 to 19,519 between 2010 and the current year. Over the next five years, the number of households is projected to increase by 8.4 percent, the company reported.

Melissa Glasgow, the St. Johns director of economic development, said the area on U.S. 1 South near the Shores is a place primed for commercial growth.

"I definitely think there is opportunity for developments along major thoroughfares in the southern part of the county to attract new retailers," she said in an email to *The Record*. "As long as the economy remains strong, retailers should have an appetite to seek new store locations in growing communities. Those areas that have infrastructure in place are more apt to be considered ahead of other potential locations needing additional financial investment."

Johnson said Ash Properties, which purchased Shores Villa Plaza after Food Lion left, has been encouraged by recent activity in the shopping center, including the new Island Prep location built on the outparcel. The company is optimistic the whole shopping center will be filled.

"You got new homes coming in and everything, so it's exciting," Johnson said of the area. "It's going to take a little time but it's exciting."