Chesterfield Should Protect Taxpayers in Mall's Redevelopment

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By: Graham Renz

In the age of Amazon, only fools, tricksters, or geniuses invest in malls.

To which group the new owner of the Chesterfield Mall—Hull Property Group—belongs, we've yet to see. Hull acquired the mall earlier this month and, even though it currently has no plans to redevelop it, Hull is already asking taxpayers for a handout.

In a statement, Hull said the mall is "too important to fail," and that, without community support (read: your money), "the marketplace may dictate an unfortunate and unforgiving future."

Those don't sound like a fool's words to me.

Hull has an impressive portfolio of dozens of malls and redeveloped retail centers across the southeast. It didn't purchase the mall without a plan, or from some sense of benevolence. Hull knows what it's doing.

Trickster? Maybe.

"All communities need their enclosed mall and the surrounding retail corridor to succeed as it is a symbol of a thriving community," Hull's website reads. Really? Is the entire Chesterfield Valley not such a symbol, with its dozens and dozens of retailers and other malls? And in Chesterfield, where the median household income in Chesterfield is over $97,000—tens of thousands more than most of the region and country—does anyone really believe that *the mall*—sitting lonesome atop a hill—is the lifeblood of Chesterfield?

Genius? Perhaps.

Hull purchased the property for a cool $13 million, less than 5% of what it was valued at in 2006. For acres and acres of land, replete with infrastructure and a massive improvement, directly adjacent to the interstate, that isn't a bad deal. Whether because of changes in broader economic trends or a creative repurposing, the mall could become incredibly valuable again. Perhaps the mall is repurposed for retail or a mix of uses, razed and platted for a subdivision, or just sat on and later sold. Whatever happens, the property has a huge upside potential.

Whether fool, trickster, or genius, Hull shouldn't be given a handout. If its plans are foolish, taxpayers shouldn't have to bear the risk. If it's a trickster, the public shouldn't pad its bottom line. And if it's a genius, no public money should have to be involved at all. Plus, given how much taxpayer money has already been doled out to developers and landowners in the Valley (especially to the outlet malls, one of which is already slated for redevelopment a mere five years after opening!), now is as good a time as any for officials to turn the spigots off.

Fortunately, Chesterfield officials have intimated that incentives won't be forthcoming. Given that it is was just last year that other city officials suggested a special taxing district be created to help subsidize the mall, this is very welcome news.

Let's hope that policymakers in Chesterfield stick to their guns and continue to stand up for taxpayers.

About the Author

Graham Renz
Policy Analyst

Graham Renz is a policy analyst at the Show-Me Institute.

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Show-Me Institute

5297 Washington Place
Saint Louis, MO 63108
Phone: (314) 454-0647
Fax: (314) 454-0667

3645 Troost Avenue
Kansas City, MO 64109
Phone: (816) 287-0370

Email: info@showmeinstitute.org

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