Panera to build prototype bakery and cafe at Stuart’s Wedgewood Commons

By Shelby Owens
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STUART — Panera Bread plans to build a 4,400-square-foot Panera Bread bakery and cafe in a Wedgewood Commons outparcel at 3500 S.E. Federal Highway. The restaurant is scheduled to open by late 2012.

The existing building, recently-vacated by Jersey Diner, will be demolished next year to make way for construction, said Peter Feldman, vice president and leasing agent for plaza owner The Morris Companies.

"This will be a free-standing location with a drive-thru window," said Jim Morgan, broker and partner in Wedgewood Commons property manager Treasure Coast Commercial Real Estate. "This is going to be the company's new prototype and future Panera Bread restaurants will be built in this style."

Saltfish Point resident Albert Covelli and his daughter and son-in-law Annette and Gavin Ford, own and operate 200 Panera Bread franchises in five states and Canada. On the Treasure Coast, Panera Bread restaurants are in Jensen Beach, Palm City, St. Lucie West, Vero Beach and Jupiter.

And there will be more Panera Bread locations soon, said Tom LaRocca, the real estate agent with Treasure Coast Sotheby's International Realty who represents Panera franchisee Covelli Family Limited Partnership.

The Stuart store is part of an aggressive expansion by Covelli throughout Florida, LaRocca said. The company also has made a purchase offer on a property in Tradition and is looking at several properties along U.S. 1 in Port St. Lucie as well as searching for properties in Vero Beach and other markets, including Tampa.

The Bealls Outlet store in the Wedgewood Commons has also been under construction, Morgan said. Tenants Fed USA, Cash Plus and Metro PCS were relocated to other Wedgewood Commons locations to make room for the Bealls expansion, which will be completed next week and opened by Thanksgiving, Morgan said.

Even with the down economy, several tenants have renewed leases and expanded at Wedgewood Commons, said Peter Feldman, vice president and leasing agent for The Morris Companies. "That speaks well for the area and it speaks well of us."

It may be one reason Panera was attracted to the area and to Wedgewood Commons, Feldman said, noting the plaza will be getting a facelift in coming months.

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