



The Woodmont Company Boosts Columbia

A recent makeover includes a facade facelift, new signage and landscaping.

More than two years after changing ownership, Columbia Gorge Outlets in Troutdale, Ore., is enjoying a new look, improved amenities, and a fresh marketing strategy, thanks to The Woodmont Company, which handles the management, leasing and marketing of the center for the center's owners, Time Equities Inc. (TEI).

Originally known as Columbia Gorge Premium Outlets, the center opened in 1991, and was in the Simon Property Group's portfolio. At around 165,000 square feet, it was one of the smaller outlets in the Simon Group. Simon sold the property to TEI for \$28.4 million in 2016.

Shortly after the acquisition, TEI tapped Woodmont to take over the management, leasing and marketing of the property. Woodmont, headquartered in Fort Worth, Tex., specializes in all aspects of retail development and management, and has a managed portfolio of around 18.4 million square feet, mostly properties that the company manages

for institutional owners, lenders, private investors and equity groups. Woodmont manages a collective 1.6 million square feet of outlet shopping centers in a division that started in 2005. Frederick J. Meno, president and chief executive officer-asset services for Woodmont, said he believes the company is the only third-party outlet center operator that has in-house leasing, marketing and management, all staffed with individuals who have outlet-specific experience and expertise.

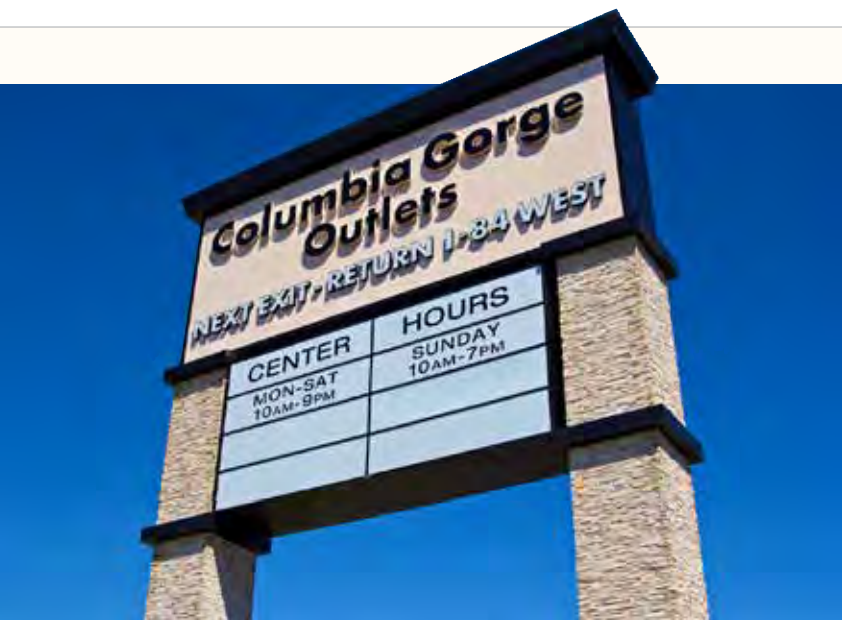
"Outlet leasing, management and marketing has been a big catalyst for our growth," said Meno. "With property values declining from where they were, a lot of retail property has gone back to lenders," particularly pre-recession loans that have matured during the past five years. Woodmont has benefited from the situation by stepping up to manage properties for the lenders or equity firms who suddenly find themselves with a shopping center in their portfolio but little expertise on how to run it."

Woodmont was able to immediately pinpoint

some changes that could have a significant impact on CGO's bottom line. While CGO's previous owner, Simon, is known for a consistent brand message and image across all of its properties, Woodmont understood that sometimes smaller properties, particularly in smaller cities, need a more personal touch.

"With smaller centers, we reverse the cookie-cutter approach and go to more of a grassroots effort," said Meno. "If you're developing a portfolio brand-marketing strategy, you often overlook marketing strategies that should otherwise target the local audience. Social media, tourism, all of these are critical components to what drives traffic to a center like Columbia River Gorge."

Woodmont implemented billboard advertising and local partnerships to help boost name recognition and traffic to the center, including a monthly kids' program, advertising in community publications and events like a celebrity back-to-school bash. "The results end up at the cash register with increased sales," said Meno.



BY JESSICA HARLAN
Staff Writer

Gorge Outlets

Where leasing was concerned, Meno said CGO's occupancy was in the upper 80 percent range before it was acquired, and under Woodmont's management, it is now well over 90 percent. For leasing information, contact John Geddis, (jgeddis@woodmont.com).

Among the new properties are a second Pendleton concept and a Bath & Body Works. Meno hinted that the company is working on additional offerings, including expanding the on-premises food offering. "We're trying to create an exciting lineup of merchants that the local shopping public and tourists really want to frequent," said Meno.

The company has worked to foster positive relationships with both new and existing tenants, with more focused attention, including quarterly merchant meetings that might include a guest

speaker and dinner. "These are events that tenants and store managers really look forward to," said Meno. "And it's been a synergistic, holistic approach to make this not just a destination for shoppers, but a place where outlet manufacturers really want to be."

A makeover was also part of Woodmont's plans for CGO. The facade received a complete facelift, including repainting, and a brand-new pylon sign bearing the center's new name offers prominent exposure from the nearby highway. Landscaping was upgraded, lighting was retrofitted and the parking lot resurfaced.

Amenities are also being incorporated, including complimentary Wi-Fi in common areas, and a mother's nursing lounge.

The investment and hard work has paid off. "This year we had a phenomenal January, sales were up well into the double digits for the month," said Meno. "We're hoping the trend continues as a

result of the momentum we've created."

The center was the first outlet center in TEI's portfolio. TEI is known for its ownership of office, industrial, residential and traditional retail real estate. "We were not specifically seeking out this product type, but rather came across a deal that had many of the attributes we look for in all of our real estate," said Ami Ziff, director of national retail for TEI. "Value retailers have outperformed their peers in recent years, especially through the last economic downturn and we are optimistic about the prospects for outlet centers and the value proposition they present. It doesn't hurt that the center is located in a state with no sales tax, which is a major draw for tourists visiting from out of town or across the border in Vancouver, Wash."

Ziff has indicated that other motivations included Columbia Gorge Outlets' proximity to downtown Portland (20 miles away), its location at the base of Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area, and the center's healthy sales volumes. ■

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