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## Tough times at the Indio Fashion Mall

*Xochitl Peña  
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Brenda Ortiz remembers when the Sears at the Indio Fashion Mall was open and customers were plenty.

These days, the manager of F.O.II Clothing Co. says there are days when she doesn't have a single sale.

"Since Sears left everything went bad. There are days we sell only \$20. The mall is bad. They need to do something fast," she said.

Some had hoped a new owner would breathe life into the troubled mall.

But its planned sale to Primestor Development Inc. out of Los Angeles fell through.

Mall owner Richard Weintraub said he has no idea what happened.

"I never really got a completely straight answer" on why it's no longer in escrow, said Weintraub, "because there's nothing wrong with the mall."

Tenants and residents who shop there paint a different picture.

Empty storefronts line the interior. Payless ShoeSource recently closed its doors and now Denim Palace Clothing store has a moving sale banner across its entrance and plans to close shop in a couple months.

"Because there's no business," manager Ali Sebs said.

## What's next

When Weintraub purchased the complex in November 2003 for \$16 million, he announced plans to transform it into a "lifestyle center" similar to The River in Rancho Mirage.

He has battled with the city over various aspects of redevelopment, and almost five years later, the mall essentially looks the same. City officials and some residents still hold out hope for revitalization.

"The entire mall needs to be repositioned. It needs to be redeveloped to bring some vibrancy to that area," Mark Wasserman, assistant to the Indio city manager said.

The city owns 17 acres behind the mall and is willing to work with a new owner to make a project happen, he said.

The city acquired most of that property some 20 years ago through eminent domain.

The city razed homes and businesses in a predominantly black neighborhood called Nobles Ranch to accommodate a planned expansion. It never happened.

Since then, some residents have been wary of any renovation plan for the mall.

"We hear things but we really don't believe it until it happens," said Jeff Domingo, who works at his aunt and uncle's clothing store at the mall called Tuff Guys.

Weintraub could not be reached for comment on plans for the mall.

Wasserman said there's still "lots of interest" from developers in purchasing the mall and using the 17 city-owned acres for its redevelopment.

"The mall and the property behind it do go hand in hand. We'd like to see the entire footprint... re-developed."

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