



## Walden Galleria turns 30 years old

2-part series focuses on financial impact and security struggles

By:

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BUFFALO, NY (WIVB) On May 1, 1989, Walden Galleria officials cut the ribbon on the biggest mall Western New York had ever seen. Within it's first few years, it put the next two closest, the Seneca Mall and the Thruway Mall out of business, and spurred other stores to sprout up all around it on Walden Avenue.

The mall still generates about \$36 million just in sales tax revenue each year from the more than half-billion dollars spent there annually. Last year, they had paid \$1.7 million in school tax revenue to the town of Cheektowaga and to Erie County in addition to another \$10.5 million in real estate taxes alone, according to Kristina Groff, the president of the Cheektowaga Chamber of Commerce. "So really, the economic impact the Walden Galleria has locally and on this region is tremendous."

While online shopping is chipping away at mall business, Desirae Currier explains why she still shops at the Walden Galleria. "There's certain things you cannot buy on Amazon; dresses for instance. And then you can't pass up taking the pictures with the Easter Bunny. You know, if we lose this mall, where are we going to do that?"

Walden Galleria officials did not want to be interviewed by News 4 for this story, but in a statement which included several bullet points, Galleria officials wrote, "While many malls have died and many more will close, the concept of "mall" is actually undergoing a healthy natural selection where only the strongest, fittest and most diversified will survive. Walden Galleria has benefitted tremendously from this industry shift and continues to be well ahead of the curve and perfectly positioned for future growth and success."

"They are the ones that are really thinking about what could be and what could we change in the course of business to really make this a great place , and they've been doing exactly that, and I'm excited to see what the future holds," said Groff.

With over 200 stores and still employing over 3,000 Western New Yorkers, tragedy struck one of those workers in December 1995. 17 year old Cynthia Wiggins was struck and killed by a truck while crossing Walden Avenue on her way to work at the mall. At the time the Route 6 Metro bus from the inner city was allowed to let off passengers on Walden Avenue, but Canadian truck drivers. The bus was not supposed to be there, but attorney John Carbone

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"It was a flashpoint, certainly, and you just remember it," said Cheektowaga Police Chief David Zack "And I think to this day, they (the Pyramid Company) suffer from that incident and that tragedy and I think it's gonna take a lot longer still to shake that. That takes generations."

In more recent years, fights at the Walden Galleria have made the headlines, often times on Christmas week . But even with more than 100 police calls of fights or disturbances at the mall last year, the police chief points out that more than 20 million people come to the mall each year, and most days have no incidents at all. "So we will continue to do our best to focus on those times and those places and try to anticipate them in advance to even reduce those types of incidents," said Chief Zack.

Noting the more than \$36 million dollars in sales tax revenue per year, Chief Zack adds, "The mall is important to all of us, and if that mall fails, we all suffer."

In March, Walden Galleria management reached agreement with the Peacemakers, a group of volunteers from Buffalo, who are now helping to patrol the mall on weekends when an evening youth curfew is in place. Cheif Zack consideres it a positive step. "We know that's worked in the past."

Andreina Benson says she's had good experiences at the Walden Galleria. "I was actually here during the whole little brawl thing (December 26). I actually just left but everywhere has a bad experience. I won't just base everything off that one thing because you can't just say 'Oh stuff like this always happens', because it doesn't always happen."

Since opening, the Walden Galleria has had an economic impact of almost \$1.1 billion. \$934 million contributed in sales tax and \$160 million in real estate taxes since 1989.

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