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Downtown Port Washington will get a holiday gift in the new year as two businesses prepare to open shop in the former Lueptow's furniture store on Franklin Street.

The businesses — Lakeshore Kitchen and Funky Fine Arts — will be the first tenants in what building owner Merton Lueptow hopes will become a mall.

"I'm developing an area called the Shoppes of Port Washington," Lueptow said Tuesday. "This is the start."

The concept is to have a number of small businesses, primarily retailers, occupying spaces in an open-style mall, Lueptow said.

"It could be a start-up business, a shop in another community that wants to open a branch here or a small established business," he said.

The first tenants, he said, are businesses that are somewhat established.

Lakeshore Kitchen is run by local contractors Brian Marquardt and Peter Burke, who have been doing kitchen remodeling but need a showroom, Lueptow said, noting they expect to open in late January. Funky Fine Arts is operated by Deb Melton, a local artist, and is expected to open in mid-January.

"They are both in business now, but they don't have the space to do what they want to," Lueptow said.

He envisions the former furniture store could become home to anywhere from 10 to 20 shops, depending on the space each requires.

Because of the way the space will be set up, shop owners can work together in a variety of ways, Lueptow said, adding he hopes the current tenants will spur other businesses.

TWO BUSINESSES will make their home in downtown Port Washington next month as tenants of the former Lueptow's furniture building. Photo by Bill Schanen IV

"I'm hoping a group of artists will come in," he said. "Other home-improvement shops would fit well."

Lueptow said the mall concept is an ideal use for the building, which has largely stood vacant since Lueptow's Furniture and Appliance closed three years ago.

"There's no other space in Port Washington where you can rent just 250 square feet," he said. "Most of the buildings in downtown are about 1,000 square feet."

Lueptow said he's been working on the concept of creating a mall in his former store for about a year. Although the building has been for sale since the furniture store closed, the sputtering economy and lack of buyers forced him to come up with a new idea for the space.

"I came to realize there was nobody big enough to use the whole area by themself," he said. "I'm adjusting to what tenants are looking for.

"I'm excited. I think this will be good for Port Washington."

There's been a lot of interest in the space, Lueptow said.

"As the economy is loosening up, we're seeing more interest," he said.

City Administrator Mark Grams said it will be good to see the building occupied once again.

“It’ll be nice to have those businesses in there,” he said.

Randy Tetzlaff, the city’s director of planning and development, said Lueptow’s plan is a good short-term solution to fill the empty building.

“This gives him the most options,” he said. “There aren’t buyers jumping right now. Filling the space is better than leaving it empty. It will give people options downtown.”

But when the building sells, Tetzlaff said, the use will likely change.

“If someone’s going to buy it, they’re going to buy it to redevelop it,” he said.