

# Plaza chief drops into city

In a brief visit to the local **Westside Plaza**, **Managing Director of Sentinel Property Group, Warren Ebert**, spoke with **BDT's Emily Ferguson** about the rumours of new major tenants, **Big W** and how the centre is doing overall.

**T**HE reason for Mr Ebert's visit to Broken Hill was a regular "check-in".

"I like to look at all of our properties around Australia at least every six months," he said. "We don't tell the management we're coming we just like to fly in and see how it is."

Mr Ebert shared his thoughts on the recent closure of Big W Broken Hill.

"We had tried to talk to them for twelve months off and on and every time you called them someone different was there.

"With the changes they had with the preoperative masters, I certainly think there was a lot of focus from the board on that and there was a billion dollars or a couple billion or whatever they lost, an enormous amount of money and then also Big W was losing money and part of that we saw from here.

"From what we're told, what I'm led to believe is that there was a decision to take all the hardware items out of Big W so it could be focused more on Masters, so you then have the turnover in Big W go down, because here you have the local hardware store and you have Big W.

"So they stop selling paint, all the hardware materials and then they say their turnovers have decreased enormously, well really?"

"It was a big store, it was a 16,000 metre store so we spoke to them about reducing the size and we just couldn't get any traction, couldn't get a response so you don't know what was happening in the head office, they wouldn't talk and we tried to talk to them," said Mr Ebert.

"So it was frustrating to say the least and then when they come out and say the reason they closed was because they couldn't do a deal with us, we couldn't even talk to the bludgers, so it was bloody annoying, that's life."



**Warren Ebert, Managing Director of Sentinel Property Group, owners of Westside Plaza.** PICTURE: Emily Ferguson

The space of the Big W store remains unoccupied, but the Sentinel Property Group hopes to make a deal with a new major tenant in the near future.

"We have a national retailer looking at a good piece of it and they're certainly not in Broken Hill so if they can come here that would be very good for Broken Hillians," said Mr Ebert.

"That'll be very good because they are one of the better performing national retailers.

"We've been dealing with them for

probably 12 months, and that was one of the things with Big W; we asked, do you want to give back a couple thousand square metres and we can get this other tenant in who doesn't work in the same area?"

"It would've been great and we couldn't get them to do that and then they just closed up.

"So we'd like to think in the next couple of months if we could do a deal with them that'd be sensational, another reason for people to come to the centre that they just don't have now.

"We have another national tenant going down the other side near the National Australia Bank and we've got a couple of other tenants that are looking at doing free-standing buildings out in the car park," said Mr Ebert.

"Now that's not gonna happen in the next few months but we're well advanced on the land and then I'll work through a planning process, so there's some positive things happening but retailing is bloody hard work."

Mr Ebert was unable to confirm the retailer that will be occupying the space near NAB Bank, despite speculation that it is the Commonwealth Bank.

"When you're dealing with major tenants those decisions are made at board level and while they can have an enormous amount of interest and get their property people to do all the work and the budgets, until it's signed off by the board and then you've gotta work through a lease, you don't have a deal, and we know that and things can change for reasons completely outside our control. So we've talked to a couple of tenants but we certainly don't have any finalised deals.

"We've got a couple of bigger tenants that we're in the process of doing a new lease with.

"With Big W going out that certainly creates a challenge so people will go to Target to get those things but on the other side, given the variety of product range that Big W had, now they can either buy that at Woolworths or the pharmacy so some of those tenants will actually improve with Big W going, but then others will miss out.

"So hopefully if we get this other national tenant that will make a massive difference."

In regards to any plans for the centre in the near future, Mr Ebert said: "Just trying to get tenants to fill the Big W space and we've got a couple of vacancies down the other end, so we'll get those filled up and work on getting new leases with existing tenants. You always have to keep working at retail, it's not like industrial when you just go away for ten years and come back."

Overall, Mr Ebert was pleased with the state of the centre and the way it's being managed.

"We've had a walk around, a drive around, and the centre is clean and tidy.

"In any regional area it's always challenging because of the harsh conditions, the heat and everything else, it knocks your buildings around and carparks, but overall it's in very good condition, the centre management does a good job so we're happy with it."

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