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ready for a rush

by chris johnson

The warm, syrupy Hallmark commercials have begun. Discount retail stores have replaced the items in the lawn & garden department with blinking lights, numerous ornaments and metallic Christmas trees. Those tents once covering orange ready-to-carve squash are now sheltering the year's harvest of evergreens. The first emails from Ebay and Amazon offering free holiday shipping have appeared in the Inbox. And, if you look around carefully enough, you may even get a glimpse of the "big guy" sporting his famed red suit. Yes, the holidays are approaching and Frisco's merchants, providing greater than 4 million square feet of retail space, are ready.

While industry prognosticators disagree as to whether this Christmas may leave the nation's retailers merry or not, most industry watchers expect holiday sales increases well below last year's 5.1 percent. However, projections vary widely – from 3 to 6.5 percent growth.

Locally, Christy Schwall, senior marketing manager with Stonebriar Centre, one of the largest malls in the Southwest, is extremely optimistic about the retail sales in Frisco. "We're excited about the upcoming holiday season!" stated Schwall. "We have the real Santa coming back this year and many great new stores, including a Nokia Experience Center and a variety of specialty carts." Schwall adds, "The mall typically does 25% of total sales during the holiday season (two months of November and December) and we are looking forward to a very positive season this year."

Frisco's Toys R Us anticipates booming holiday sales as well. "We have more new toys this year than ever before," noted Theresa Samaniego, department manager. "This is our second holiday season in Frisco and many parents are well-aware of our selection and are expecting us to have all the hot toys of the season in stock. We're ready."

While Frisco's retailers anticipate greater-than-average growth in sales, the National Retail Federation (NRF), a Washington D.C.-based trade association, predicts only 4.5 percent growth nationally over last year, citing strength in sales from home-related merchandise and consumer electronics this holiday season, coupled with strong clothing sales. NRF concedes, however, that rising interest rates and slow income growth could hurt sales.

However, other industry watchers predict high-end retailers such as Neiman Marcus and Nordstrom expect a lucrative holiday season, continuing a strong growth trend that began with August sales. Neiman Marcus posted a 14.4 percent increase in comparable sales for that month, well above the industry average for same-store sales of 1.1 percent.

Nordstrom, reporting same-store sales growth of 7.2 percent in August, cited increasing demand for its accessories, women's shoes and women's designer apparel.

So, whether you're headed to Stonebriar Centre or the Centre at Preston Ridge and it's more than 115 stores, shops and restaurants or to the various shops and boutiques of downtown Frisco to find that one-of-a-kind gift or antique, be assured your spending matters-and not just to the gift recipient. You could be making some industry specialist right ... or wrong.

While it remains to be seen whether holiday sales growth will be the highest since 1999, the ICSC reported an encouraging fact. This year the calendar has 29 shopping days between Thanksgiving and Christmas – the most since 2001. More days could mean more money. And, for those of us who could always use a few more days, regardless of the money, we got 'em.

Chris Johnson is publisher of Frisco STYLE Magazine.