

'This is a great chance, we just have to do it'

Man with a plan: John Hirst wants to turn Broadmead into a Mecca for shoppers across the West



JOHAN Hirst says he has never felt more like a campaigning politician.

Over the coming weeks he and his team will be talking to all 265 traders in the city centre to set out their stall ahead of the big vote.

It promises to be a campaign every bit as intense as those being conducted by politicians at the same time.

It is not a seat, however, that Mr Hirst is hoping to win at the vote that takes place a month after May's general and local elections, but the licence to give Broadmead the makeover of its life.

He wants to transform what he says is the current "drab and downmarket" appearance of the 1950s buildings into a mecca for shoppers across the South West.

Mr Hirst said: "I feel more like a councillor than I ever have.

"I have to decide whether I'm prepared to stake my colours to the mast - and I am, because I believe I have something good to sell here.

"I feel confident that what I'm doing is the right thing for the centre of Bristol."

Already, the centre is going to be extended in a £500 million redevelopment, scheduled to be completed in 2008, featuring a new House of Fraser as its centrepiece.

But Mr Hirst is asking retailers to make that part of the city centre not scheduled for redevelopment - an area bounded by Nelson Street, Newgate, St James Barton roundabout and Penn Street - into a Business Improvement District.

The BID will see traders pledge £1 million between them over the next three years, in order to pay for the new look he is planning.

If more than 50 per cent of shopkeepers, calculated both in terms of a straight majority and in

Broadmead manager John Hirst is hard at work persuading the centre's retailers to pay for changes to its "drab and downmarket" appearance. CHLOE RIGBY talked to him about electioneering, the new look, marathons and retirement.

terms of store floor area, vote in favour then all will be required to pay 1.5 per cent of their business rates each year for three years towards the changes.

The smallest will pay as little as £180 a year, but the larger stores are looking at a bill of up to £12,000.

Mr Hirst hopes the property owners will also agree to pay another £1 million between them.

In return he promises a transformation far beyond the general cleanliness and crime prevention measure being promised by other towns and cities campaigning to be a BID.

Indeed, nothing less than a complete overhaul is promised.

"It is like a house that needs redecorating," says Mr Hirst.

"Think of it with new carpets, new wallpaper, new furniture.

"I know we have done it in our house and it is like going into a new home.

"Broadmead is tired and needs to be transformed, and I think we can transform it."

Practically, that would mean new paving, new street furniture and a general decluttering.

Retailers are being consulted on the plans, with a "Broadmead Retailers Panel" established as a forum for discussion.

Later this month the Broadmead

board will publish a detailed plan of exactly just what they and the shopkeepers have come up with.

Mr Hirst is cautiously optimistic about the outcome of a vote. In other cities two have rejected the idea while eight have accepted it.

"There has been a positive response but I'm not expecting it to be smooth sailing all the way through," he said.

"Everyone I've spoken to so far is in agreement that Broadmead needs to be revitalised.

"No one is saying it needs to be maintained as it is."

After all he says, it makes good business sense. Shopkeepers paid towards a recent revamp of the Arcade in the city centre, and one retailer with four shops there has reported takings up by 20 per cent, prompting Mr Hirst to declare the proposed overhaul a "no lose situation".

Rather than a lack of will to make the changes, he says he senses a frustration that work cannot be under way before its likely start date of early next year.

He says the delay is down to the timetable in the BID process, although the work is expected to be completed before the new part of Broadmead opens in 2008.

"The whole thing is to make Broadmead bigger," said Mr Hirst.

"It doesn't offer enough to the people of Bristol. People who don't live here don't come to Bristol shopping. But we hope they will when Broadmead is complete.

"It will be bigger than Cardiff and the nearest thing to this will be in Birmingham. It will be the best in the region."

After 22 years at department store group Sears Mr Hirst joined the Broadmead board in 1997.

His job is responsible both to the public sector (Bristol City Council) and the private sector (Bristol Chamber of Commerce and Initiative).

At the time one leading local property agent told Mr Hirst it would take 15 years to change Broadmead.

Although he did not believe it at the time, Mr Hirst now thinks that was pretty much accurate.

Eight years in to the job he is looking forward to the future.

By the time Broadmead is complete in 2008 he believes it will be time for him to step down and enjoy early retirement.

He is keen to move out of Emersons Green to the Gloucestershire countryside, with his GP wife Cath and young son Adam.

There he will concentrate on new targets: running a marathon for each year of his life and improving his golf.

So far the marathon total stands at 20, including the Paris marathon run just this weekend, so the 49-year-old has some way to go.

Some way to go as well, before the new Broadmead is unveiled.

But there is one thing Mr Hirst is completely sure about.

"This is a great opportunity for us to upgrade the existing Broadmead area," he declared.

"We have to do it."