

# Post-Pandemic Shoppers are Gung-Ho

After a year of Amazon Prime and Instacart, Westchester shoppers are slowly but surely returning to their beloved brick-and-mortar stores.

Abby Luby

## Examiner+ NEWS + ISSUES

*A note from our Publisher:*

*The best news features rarely start with a press release. It's usually a little nugget from a source, a passing comment from a friend, a tangentially related news item that sparks an idea, etc. Today's report for Examiner+ is a perfect example of that. I was chatting on the phone with the Director of Marketing at Simon Malls' The Westchester Mall, Maria Gregorius, on an unrelated matter. She noted how The Westchester was packed, due to COVID-related supply chain disruptions and a post pandemic fervor to reenter the physical shopping world and bypass Amazon. Did this represent a broader trend? Was it a temporary blip? What about downtown retailers? Digital Editor Robert Schork and I asked ourselves those questions and more. And then we asked our excellent reporter Abby Luby to get the answers. Here they are. Hope you find the coverage informative. Happy Friday and happy (almost) last-minute shopping this weekend!*

Best,  
Adam

If there's one lesson learned from last year's pandemic, it's how much we crave genuine social interaction. During COVID, holed-up in our homes, visually tied to computer or TV screens, we knew there was something big missing. We were itching to be out in the world, dining with friends, going to the movies, and shopping.

In the spring of 2020, Westchester retailers struggled to keep their businesses viable while some local retailers shuttered their doors. The county lost brand stores that went bankrupt including GNC, Pier 1 Imports, Men's Wearhouse, Brooks Brothers, and Lord & Taylor. Many indoor malls were closed to the public.

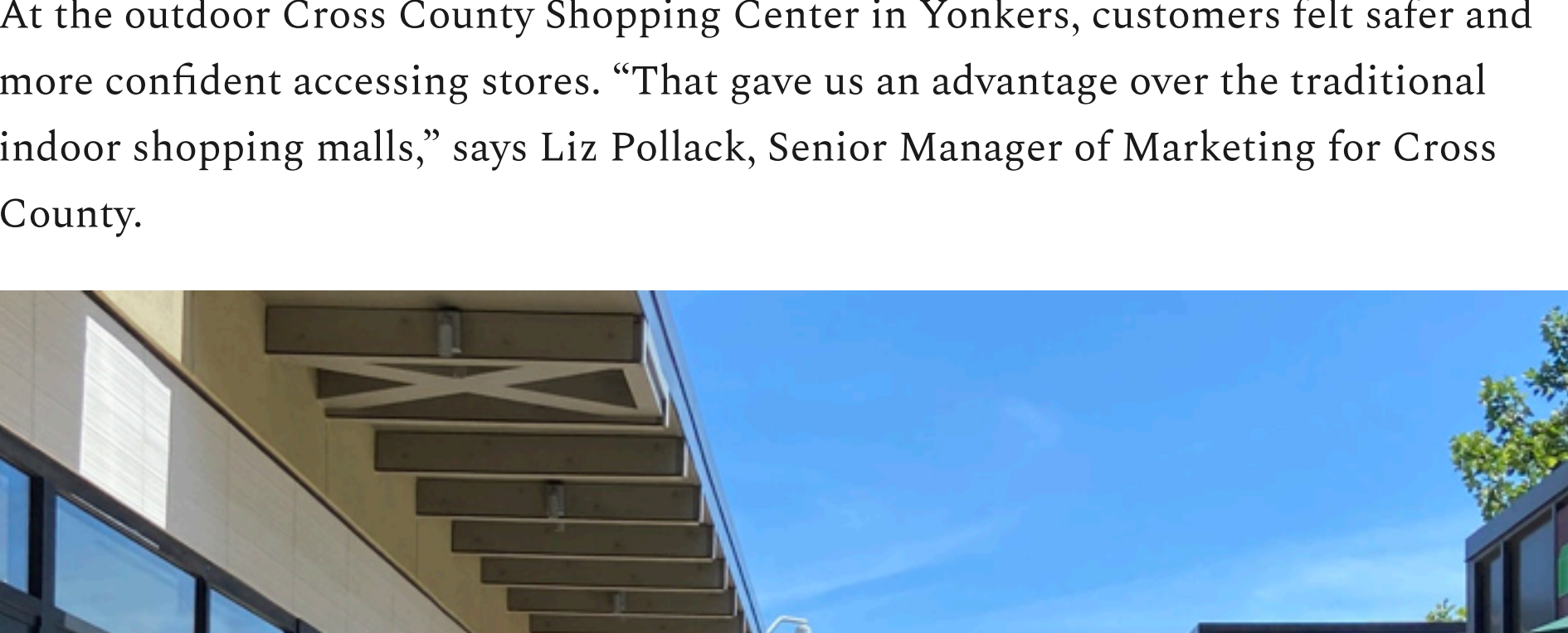
Today, if you are out holiday shopping you may wonder how we got from COVID-empty malls and closed businesses to bustling crowds of consumers.

Well, here's how.

"COVID was really tough on retailers," says Bridget Gibbons, Westchester County Director of Economic Development. "We saw numerous closings and it was a pretty intense period for many sellers."

But businesses began to figure out ways to operate within the constraints of COVID. "A number of retailers were allowed to have curbside pick-up for their customers who ordered online," Gibbons recalls. "That got them through the pandemic."

Businesses in malls were especially hit hard with COVID guidelines restricting or prohibiting inside public gatherings. "Our shopping center was closed for five months out of the year," says Alexa O'Rourke General Manager of the Jefferson Valley Mall in Yorktown. "Every business owner adapted and we stayed dynamic."



Jefferson Valley Mall reopened after being closed for five months in 2020.

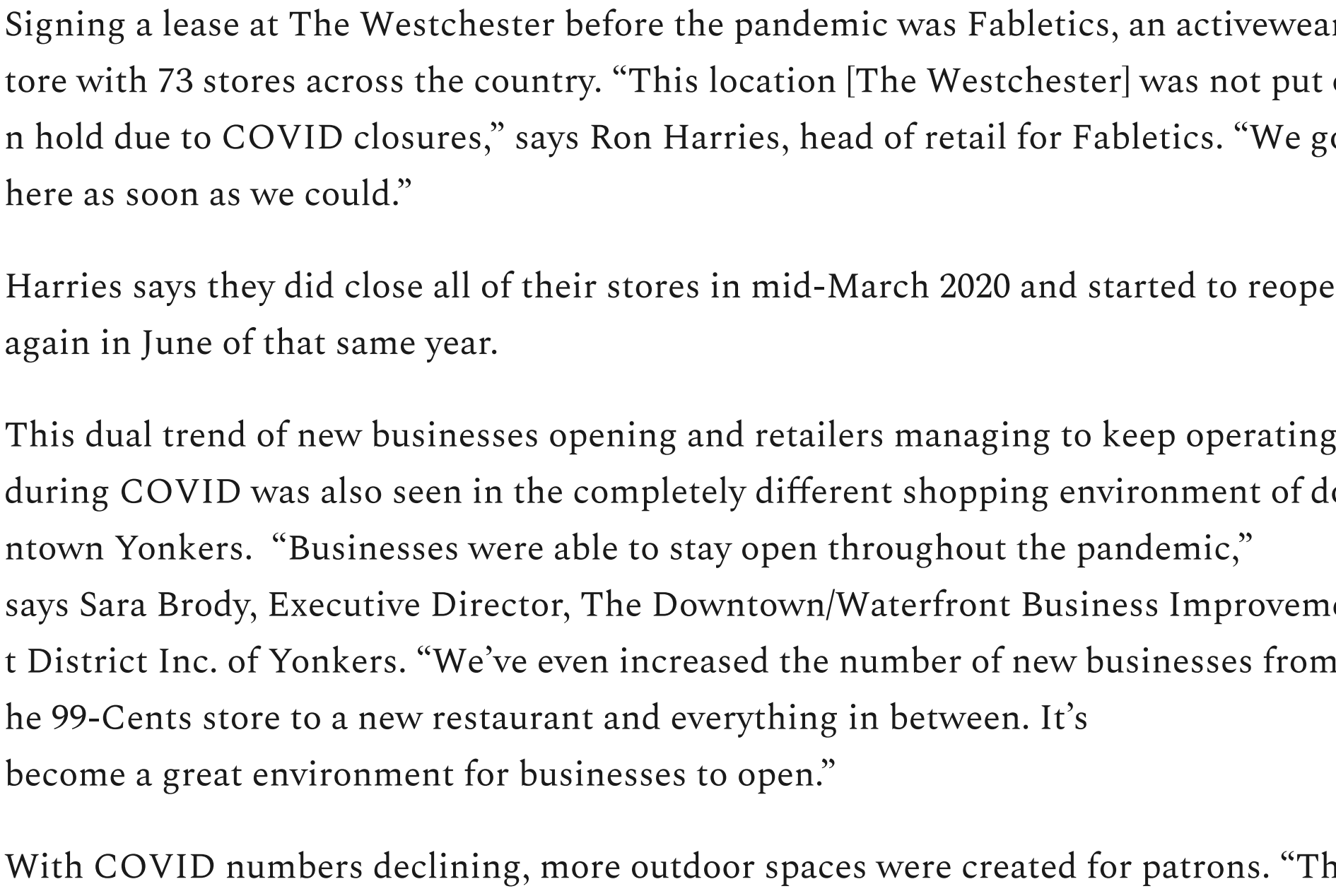
Jefferson Valley Mall anchors, Macy's and Dick's Sporting Goods, and the mall's smaller business owners adjusted their business model and offered curbside pickup from online orders. "We had designated spots for curbside pickup for both upstairs and downstairs street levels," says O'Rourke. "We had the food truck *Put Some Meat On Your Bones* outside for shoppers who were picking up packages — another convenience extended to our customers."

At the outdoor Cross County Shopping Center in Yonkers, customers felt safer and more confident accessing stores. "That gave us an advantage over the traditional indoor shopping malls," says Liz Pollack, Senior Manager of Marketing for Cross County.



Cross County Shopping Center in Yonkers, where shoppers felt safer shopping during the pandemic because of outside access to stores.

Surprisingly, amidst the pandemic gloom and doom, Cross County was bolstered when Target, the nation's second-largest retailer, signed a 40-year lease for 132,000 square feet of the former Sears — a prescient sign that retailers anticipated a post-COVID upward trend, affirming there was light at the end of the tunnel. Similarly, as virus numbers ticked down in the spring of 2020, The Westchester in White Plains signed new leases with stores such as Forever 21, Moose Knuckles, Sunglass Hut's new flagship store, Fabletics, Levi's, Aerie, and Therabody.



Moose Knuckles, a new store that opened at the end of the pandemic at The Westchester in White Plains.

"Overall, the retail business at The Westchester has proved to be very strong," says Maria Gregorius, Director of Marketing at The Westchester. According to Gregorius, during the pandemic more purchasing was done in the home category. "These stores have done exceptionally well this past year as people have invested in remodeling and refurbishing their homes."

Signing a lease at The Westchester before the pandemic was Fabletics, an activewear store with 73 stores across the country. "This location [The Westchester] was not put on hold due to COVID closures," says Ron Harries, head of retail for Fabletics. "We got here as soon as we could."

Harries says they did close all of their stores in mid-March 2020 and started to reopen again in June of that same year.

This dual trend of new businesses opening and retailers managing to keep operating during COVID was also seen in the completely different shopping environment of downtown Yonkers. "Businesses were able to stay open throughout the pandemic," says Sara Brody, Executive Director, The Downtown/Waterfront Business Improvement District Inc. of Yonkers. "We've even increased the number of new businesses from the 99-Cents store to a new restaurant and everything in between. It's become a great environment for businesses to open."

With COVID numbers declining, more outdoor spaces were created for patrons. "The concept of outdoor dining was growing here in Yonkers," says Brody. "People started to come out more throughout the summer and fall. We had amazing numbers at the Riverfest, our live waterfront concert series."

Embracing the safety of outdoor events quickly morphed into a different business model: selling socially interactive, good time experiences outside where folks could feel safe and sense a return to normalcy. And it wasn't only to persuade folks to buy things.

"We put a greater emphasis on what we could do for the community," says O'Rourke, referring to Jefferson Valley's hosting seven outdoor graduations for high, middle, and elementary schools from all over Westchester county in 2020. "We had hundreds of cars in our parking lots and huge screens showing graduation ceremonies. We had to shift and adapt."

As malls opened and businesses were hungry for customers, the outdoor, socially interactive model swept inside to create more experiential, good times. At Jefferson Valley, the focus turned to events, sports, fitness activities for all ages. The shopping was being redefined by adding a virtual reality studio or PizZaZzles offering creative arts and crafts classes for kids. O'Rourke claims people wanted to engage and "turn off Amazon and watch their children run around at places like Footbik that teach children how to play soccer and use as an educational tool."

A fun night out with friends ushered in the new movie dine-in venue. The Look Dine-In Cinema about to open in Dobbs Ferry is being marketed as a hospitality-driven, technology-first luxury cinema experience. "Communities want a new experience and they want it to be great," says LOOK founder Brian Schultz. "It seemed right for post COVID with the stated purpose to bring us back together." LOOK Dine-In has theatres in Dallas, Arizona, and several in California.

Located at 1 Hamilton St. in Dobbs Ferry, the LOOK Dine-In cinema boasts eight auditoriums to accommodate larger audiences and smaller private parties, replete with recliner seats, made to order meals from their on-site commercial kitchen and delivered before the movie starts. "Most customers haven't been to a movie for two years and opening Look Dine-In in Dobbs Ferry is part of a whole new habit we're trying to set," says Schultz.

For other independently owned businesses, tailoring goods and products to fit communities' needs was key. During the pandemic, the Village Bookstore in Pleasantville offered curbside pickup and complimentary delivery for orders over \$25 within a 10-mile radius, and their sales were steady. "When we closed for in-person browsing, 50 percent of our sales came from our website," says bookstore owner Jennifer Kohn. "Once we opened there was a dramatic shift. People wanted to come and browse and not be online."



Jennifer Kohn, owner of the Village Bookstore in Pleasantville. They see about 1000 people a month come through their doors.

Kohn says there usually was more foot traffic on the weekends from patrons attending the Jacob Burns Film Center, which closed temporarily because of the pandemic. When Jacob Burns reopened in June 2021, the number of bookstore browsers and purchasers increased. "We see about 1000 people a month walk into our store," Kohn says.

An interesting rise in teen and YA books promoted by videos on TikTok's #BookTok, has seen a resurgence in book purchases by teens, Kohn says. "We've seen a spike over the summer for titles that are hot on TikTok. The kids come in, sit on the floor and go through a bunch of books and then they might buy one. It's nice to see."

Other small businesses forced to close between March and June 2020, reopened to a steady stream of customers. "Our customers wanted to see and handle what they wanted to buy," says Lori Weil, co-owner of Wishes, a gift boutique on Commerce Street in Yorktown. "They were tired of online shopping and the bigger stores didn't have what they were looking for." Weil has co-owned the store with Debbie Zapakin for the last 15 years. The small store requires masks and allows two or three customers inside at the same time.



Lori Weil, owner of Wishes gift boutique in Yorktown that was closed during the pandemic between March and June 2020. It reopened to a steady stream of customers.

In the city of Peekskill, PK Blenz Juice Bar owner Rob Scott says his worst year was during the pandemic. "You didn't know what was going on but I never shut down."

For over five years Scott has served customers vegan smoothies, fresh juices, vegan nachos, and pasta, and is busiest during the spring, summer, and fall. "For me, the focus is more about the city and developing more activity," Scott commented.



PK Blenz Juice Bar owner Rob Scott in his Peekskill shop. Scott never shut down during the pandemic.

President Debra Milone of the Peekskill-based Hudson Valley Gateway Chamber of Commerce says determination and perseverance by small regional businesses are what have been ultimately attracting patrons, adding to a shopping revival.

"It's been difficult these last two years but this [business] community has been heroic," says Milone. "Since opening after the pandemic and over the last year, new businesses have cropped up and established businesses have plugged on to make things happen."

Of retail newcomers, Milone cited two new Peekskill businesses: Lily of the Valley Floral Design flower shop and Persephone's Pearl, a woman-owned beauty business. Other new businesses nearby include Double Docs Design, a home goods store in Croton-on-Hudson, and Cortlandt Town Center's newly opened restaurant, Dog Haus.

The carryover of pandemic-driven business models such as online ordering and curbside pick-up have, according to Gibbons, added to Westchester retail's climb to top gains in July and August of 2021. "People feel optimistic and there's really been a lot of pent-up demand," she says. "There is a great retail rebound because people are coming to Westchester to shop where it's less dense, slower shopping and fresh air."

Clearly, the COVID pandemic changed selling strategies and directed new trends. Gibbons pointed out, "What doesn't kill us makes us stronger."

Abby Luby is a writer and journalist living in the Hudson Valley. She currently writes for The Examiner and has written for The New York Daily News, SolveClimateNews, The Villager, The Real Deal, and the Record Review ([www.abbyluby.com](http://www.abbyluby.com)). Her feature writing on food and on the arts has been published in Hook Magazine, Valley Table Magazine, Edible Hudson Valley, Roll Magazine, Living@HomeCT, the Poughkeepsie Journal, The Stamford Advocate/Greenwich Time. Luby began writing creative non-fiction and poetry eight years ago. Her published short stories appear in the literary journals [Parhelion](#) and [Persimmon Tree](#).

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