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Lifestyle centers offer more than fresh air

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RANCHO CUCAMONGA - Shawna Schweitzer watched as her five-year-old daughter Hannah played just outside the Victoria Gardens food court.

Schweitzer and her daughter were not alone.

The Upland resident was joined by a number of parents looking at their children enjoy the options at the shopping center's playground.

The 147-acre outdoor shopping center at 12505 N. Mainstreet is not just for adults.

"I think this is more family-oriented than indoor malls," Schweitzer said. "You're outdoors, so it's a chance to get some fresh air. Here you could eat, shop and the kids can play and meet with friends. It's just nice."

In the past several years, the lifestyle-center format has emerged as a popular trend

for large-scale, retail-development projects, according to the International Council of Shopping Centers, an international trade association for the retail real estate industry.

The open-air retail villages - which feature high-end brand stores and typically are situated in or near affluent communities - are popping up throughout the country.

Lifestyle-center operators aim for a different experience than the traditional enclosed malls, which in the last half of the 20th century dominated the shopping-center industry.

"We like the outdoor atmosphere," said Mike Sweitzer of Arizona, who brought his two young sons for a day out at Victoria Gardens.

Victoria Gardens, which opened in 2004, is among the region's most popular lifestyle centers because of its upscale shops, restaurants, movie theaters and cultural center.

The public amenities not typically seen at traditional malls - such as cultural amenities, live entertainment and interactive play areas - are a major reason that shoppers are drawn to the the lifestyle centers.

San Bernardino resident Ursula Flores said she goes to Victoria Gardens at least twice a month with her children.

"It's fun for all of us," Flores said. "It's hard to take them to a regular mall because they don't have a lot of things for the kids. I just push them in the stroller, and they don't have anywhere for them to play. It gets pretty boring for them for a while, so this is pretty fun for them."

Two more lifestyle centers recently joined Victoria Gardens in opening in the region - the Promenade Shops at Dos Lagos in Corona in 2006 and The Shoppes at Chino Hills in May.

Throughout the nation, the lifestyle centers or hybrids of the centers - which have been conjoined to existing malls, big-box retail centers or mixed-use developments - have increasingly become a retail format of choice for developers, said Erin Hershkowitz, International Council of Shopping Centers spokeswoman.

With the increasing proliferation of lifestyle centers, don't expect to soon see the building of any traditional malls, experts said.

"The indoor mall is beginning to become obsolete," said Stephen Atchley, an economics professor and Pomona City councilman. "People enjoy the ambiance of outdoor centers."