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**Stair-step retaining wall makes for safer shopping at center**

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INVERNESS

Shopping and living around the U.S. 280 Inverness Heights Market shopping center is safer, due to a new five-tiered retaining wall on a steep slope bordering the shopping center.

Drainage and landscaping work continue in the final month of construction on the \$3 million project.

Nearby stores include TJ Maxx, Party City and Wright Dairy.

"It was cut at an extremely steep angle," said wall design engineer Sean Wokasien, vice president of Synergy Earth Systems in Daphne. "There were some stability problems in the area, and the concrete barriers they put alongside the bottom continued filling up" with falling dirt and rocks.

The new walls are designed in a stair-step fashion, allowing drainage and landscaping to reduce erosion.

"It's one of the biggest retaining walls in Birmingham," said Mike Darby, owner of Superior Wall and Paver in Birmingham. "There is half-a-million dollars in gravel, alone."

Work began about 18 months ago, when steep hillside erosion became an increasing problem in the low shopping center parking lot, and in nearby residential storm drains.

Current property owner Matt Renner of St. Louis opted to make the repairs. His motive was safety, not retail expansion, said David Been, director of geotechnical services for Gallet & Associates consulting of Birmingham.

The Alabama Department of Environmental Management, or ADEM, was also concerned about erosion.

Renner remains in arbitration with Kimco Realty Corp., of Dallas, the company that first developed the property.

"The new owner said it affected sales and leases of the property," Been said of the slope issues. "If it had gotten worse, you could have had soil on the buildings."

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