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DriveTime used car dealership to open in West Ashley

Store takes over ex-Johnny's Subaru site

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Phoenix-based used car dealership DriveTime is to open March 18 in the former Johnny's Subaru dealership on Savannah Highway.

An expanding national used car dealership that targets people with less-than-perfect credit soon will drive onto the former Johnny's Subaru site on Savannah Highway.

Phoenix-based DriveTime, which got its start as Ugly Duckling in Tucson, Ariz., is renovating the 10,000-square-foot building near the Mark Clark Expressway.

It plans to open March 18, company spokesman Jon Ehlinger said.

"Charleston is part of a 15-20 store expansion we have going on in 2011," he said. "This rounds out our South Carolina expansion."

The company already has dealerships in Columbia and Greenville.

The West Ashley store will be less than a mile from nearby CarMax, but Ehlinger said DriveTime is not going after CarMax customers.

"We are really dealing with and serving a customer who can't obtain financing," he said. "We are complementary to them rather than in competition with them."

DriveTime not only sells used cars but offers financing as well.

"We are committed to sending our customers home in a quality used vehicle, regardless of their financial circumstances," DriveTime's website says.

The dealership will stock about 70 preowned vehicles at any given time, Ehlinger said.

The company, which went public in 1996 before going private in 2002 as DriveTime, sold 53,000 used cars last year. "We expect to sell 60,000 to 64,000 used cars this year," Ehlinger added.

With the addition of Charleston, the company will have 86 dealerships in 30 metropolitan areas in 14 states.

Johnny's Subaru closed in March 2009 at the height of the recession two months after owner Johnny Dangerfield shuttered his two Suzuki dealerships in Moncks Corner and Summerville. The building has been vacant ever since though a pharmacy chain eyed it at one time.

Ehlinger said DriveTime is spending about \$300,000 to upgrade the building and grounds on the 1.3-acre site it is leasing diagonally across from Toyota of Charleston.

While the company's niche market is people with credit issues, it will sell a used car to anyone, Ehlinger said.

"We invite people to check us out and see what we have to offer," he added. "This is something very unique and different."

The dealership will employ about a dozen workers. Ehlinger said the bulk of them already have been hired, but others can seek employment opportunities by going to www.drivetime.com and clicking on "careers."

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