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Needles' lone grocery store announces plans to close May 9



News West file photo

Closing

Bashas' Grocery in Needles will close May 9, nearly four years after the city's only grocery store agreed to remain in Needles with the help of a city-paid utility subsidy.

NEEDLES — Word spread quickly about Bashas' Grocery closing May 9, which means the loss of more than 40 jobs and Needles' only grocery store.

Rick Daniels, city manager, said finding a replacement is a top priority for the city at this time. There are a lot of soon-to-be-unemployed residents to think about along with needing to be able to provide fresh food to everyone, he added.

There is also the fact that a grocer in town has implications on the tourism aspect, he said. Every summer, visitors come out, stop at Bashas', purchase various food products and other needed items and then head to the Colorado River. A grocer in town is needed for that aspect also, he continued.

Daniels said it wasn't shocking news to hear the grocery store was closing its doors. The city hoped for the best but has been preparing for the worst, he said.

Knowing the store's lease with Reliable Properties was up at the end of June and the agreement with the city for a utility subsidy would also conclude in June, the city assumed it likely that Bashas' would close, he said. He, staff and now the new economic development consultant have been working to attract a grocery store since the first of the year, he said.

Four years ago, the store nearly closed, citing the company's bankruptcy and rising rental costs as major issues. The city intervened, responding to concerns of residents and visitors that the city wouldn't have a store to buy fresh food and other items.

A three-way deal was worked out between the city, Bashas' and Reliable Properties to keep the store open. The city subsidized the store through the utilities and paid \$150,000 for the first two years and \$200,000 for the last two, with this being the final year.

On Wednesday, the Needles City Council voted to cancel the final \$50,000 payment to Bashas' because the store is closing before the end of the contract.

Daniels said the city has been talking with Reliable Properties about the issue also. Both parties have been exploring options since the start of year. The city had the hired economic development consultant, Michael Bracken, involved in the process.

Daniels said Bracken will attend a networking event in Los Angeles called Retail Live! The event is an opportunity to connect with various retailers and see if those businesses would be a good fit for a city. It may be a chance to connect with a grocer.

Bracken will attend the International Conference of Shopping Centers on April 2, Daniels said. Again, the conference is a chance to connect with potential grocers and other retailers.

Daniels said the conference is really a large trade show and it serves as an introduction between communities and retailers of all types including restaurants like Subway and all-purpose stores like Walmart.

In preparation for both events, the city has been working to prepare logistics those retailers are going to want, Daniels said. Retailers need to know about population, traffic through town and demographics of the city. That information has been prepared and is ready to go, he said.

While the city has been working on this issue, so has Reliable Properties, Daniels said. The shopping center owner also has a vested interest: There will be a space opening up that it needs filled, a space already suitable for a grocer.

Reliable Properties has many shopping centers throughout Southern California, Daniels said. The company is using its own contacts to see who would be interested in coming to Needles.

Daniels said he doesn't think there will be a replacement by May 9; it would be too quick a turnaround. He said he does feel good about the work the city has already put into the process and knowing that Reliable Properties is also working to solve the problem.

City staff and Reliable Properties are talking to all national grocery store chains, Daniels said. They are looking at all options.

He said finding a replacement is an urgent matter. The prosperity of a community depends on having basic services such as a grocer.

"It's a critical element to the fabric of a community," he said.

Repeated calls and email sent to Bashas' public relations department were not immediately returned.