

Watsonville businesses busier since strike ended

By LANE WALLACE

STAFF WRITER

Some Watsonville merchants have noted an increase in business since the frozen-food plant strike ended two weeks ago, but they're not saying it's all because the strike is over.

In a spot survey this week, two-thirds of the merchants polled said people are buying more than before the strike. The others said that while business is generally good, they haven't seen a particular jump since the strike ended March 11.

"We've done better" since the strike ended, said Jean Andrew, assistant manager of Longs Drug in downtown Watsonville. "People are spending more money per person."

The mood of the customers has also gotten better, Andrew said.

"The store feels like it's getting more lively," she said.

Andrew, like other merchants surveyed, couldn't say there's a direct cause-and-effect relationship there.

Mike Jordan, manager of the Watsonville Bank of America branch, said he hasn't seen much impact yet from the resumption of work at Norcal

Frozen Foods, the successor to Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co.

Jordan expects to see an impact, but not until April or May, when employment in the frozen-food industry increases.

Norcal started with 200 workers and expects to reach 600 or 700 at peak times this year.

Joe Garcia, assistant manager of PayLess Drugs in Watsonville Square, said there's been a three to four percent increase in business in the last two weeks.

Jerry De Kay, manager of Tropicana Foods in the Crestview Center on Freedom Boulevard, said that "people are spending more freely."

"The people have a good feeling," he said.

Ophelia Bernal, manager of Wise Fashions in Crestview Center, said business has been generally good, but is "about the same" as during the strike.

Bernal and DeKay said they haven't noted any increase in the number of customers in the center. But across the street at the Lucky Center, foot traffic is up "20 to 30 percent" in the last two weeks, said Clark Nelson, manager of Payless Shoe Source.

Nelson said his business is up 50 percent over last year, but the increase since the strike began has been "relatively small."

Bill Roberts, assistant manager of H and H Home Center in East Lake Village, said there hasn't been any increase in business since the strike ended. Sales were "super" during the strike, Roberts said, but whether it would have been greater if there hadn't been a strike "is pretty hard to pin down."

Ray Maldonado, manager of Clothes Out, a discount clothing store in Watsonville Square, said business has been up. He believes the end of the strike has helped, but also notes that the new spring and summer clothing has recently come in.

Cal Watkins, manager of J.C. Penney in downtown Watsonville, said business has been increasing since last fall, but there's been no particular increase since the strike ended.

Ernestine Rodriguez, owner of Ernie's Lady Fair Shoppe in the 400 block of Main Street, said she's noticed increased foot traffic downtown since the strike ended.