

JCPenney closure a surprise



Michael McCollum

JCPenney clerk Michelle Rillera, left, serves customers W.L. and Dreama Gordy, residents of Jackson, Miss., who are vacationing in the area. The Mississippi couple stopped in to buy a few items Tuesday, shortly after Rillera's bosses announced the downtown store will be closed.



Watsonville resident and Penney customer Ardys Collins is saddened by the closure.

REFERENCE

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By LANE WALLACE

STAFF WRITER

WATSONVILLE — Word of the planned closing of the JCPenney store at 501 Main St. came as a surprise Monday to employees, customers and the owner of the building.

Michelle Rillera, 19, a clerk at the store since October, said she was told of the closing when she arrived for work Monday. "I had no thought of it (closing) whatsoever," said Rillera, who, like the other 21 employees, will be offered jobs at other JCPenney stores.

"We were surprised," said Ardys Collins, a 49-year Watsonville resident who was visiting the store with her daughter, Jeanie Collins Pearson, who grew up in Watsonville and now lives in Lake Tahoe.

Pearson said she was sad to see the store close, fondly rattling off a long list of women's clothing stores in Watsonville, many of them long gone from downtown.

Watsonville was once a "fashion forward town" that now lacks enough upscale clothing shops, Pearson said.

They were in the store in the early afternoon, a few hours after JCPenney issued a press release that the store would close by July 31, when the lease expires.

"We simply have no other option," said Bill Risko, JCPenney's district manager, in a prepared statement. "Due to business declines in recent years and the store's performance not meeting company expectations, we have decided to close the store."

Building owner Weldon Griffin, reached Monday afternoon at his mortgage company office in the San Diego County city of La Mesa, said he had been told of the decision an hour earlier by a JCPenney official in Dallas.

"I was in total shock," Griffin said. "I had been negotiating in good faith" for renewal of the lease on the 17,000-square-foot building.

Now, Griffin said, "the building is for sale or lease."

JCPenney has been in downtown Watsonville since 1923, and since 1956 at the present site.

Jose Alonzo, a maintenance and stock clerk at JCPenney for the last two years, said he was surprised at the closure announcement, even though he knew the lease would be coming up.

"It's a major impact on the downtown," Alonzo said, adding that he plans to continue with the company.

"I just kind of wonder what was missing to make it a viable opera

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PENNEY

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tion," Alonzo said as he watched his daughter Vanessa, 11, model a dress she was trying on.

The closure "is one more to add to the burden" of the downtown, Alonzo said.

Rillera, who has worked in all departments of the store in her six months there, said JCPenney has been "my first fun job." She said she'll be sad to see the staff broken up.

"We worked so well together," Rillera said. One worker was planning to retire, but decided to stay on when she heard the store would close.

Stephanie Brown, a JCPenney spokeswoman in Dallas, said the company's research indicated "many Watsonville residents are already shopping the larger JCPenney stores more than the Watsonville location." Exact figures were not available.

The decision to close was based on sales, Brown said, not on the size of the store. There's a mixture of small, medium and large stores among the company's 1,238 stores, she said.