A&P End of an Era

Aisha Al-Muslim
From the last can of tomato sauce to the last roll of paper towels, everything is on sale at the few remaining Waldbaum’s and Pathmark stores open on Long Island as their parent company, the Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Co., prepares to go out of business forever.

A&P is in Chapter 11 bankruptcy, and by the end of this month, its 51 Long Island supermarkets will have shut their doors. While many of A&P’s 5,000 workers on Long Island have been hired at successor grocery stores, the closures are costing more than 2,000 jobs in Nassau and Suffolk counties.

So far, A&P has received bankruptcy court approval to sell 31 of its Long Island stores for more than $50 million. Most have been bought by other supermarket chains. It has pending offers totaling $4 million for two stores. Thirteen stores remain unsold, and five closed in October.

For some Long Island shoppers, the thought of having a brand-new grocery store in their neighborhood is cause for excitement. But for others, the closings leave them with fewer choices and longer trips to get food.

“I feel like a good friend abandoned us,” said Donald E. Simon, 72, of East Meadow, who said he doesn’t understand why the Waldbaum’s he has shopped at since 1976 wasn’t bought by another supermarket.

And for many A&P employees on Long Island, the end of the chain is a direct blow.

“We are the ones suffering.”

See CLOSED on A44
As final stores in the chain prepare to close their doors, consumers and employees wonder what the future holds

CLOSED from A43

said Sabitri Grappone, 58, who worked as a bookkeeper and cashier at the Waldbaum's in Jericho and had been with A&P for 41 years. "In a few weeks people are going to be on the unemployment line."

An A&P spokeswoman declined to comment.


Montvale, New Jersey-based A&P operated 296 stores under banners such as A&P, Food Emporium, Super Fresh and Food Basics; its 51 local stores included 32 Waldbaum's and 19 Pathmarks.

Mail-order started in 1859

A&P was founded in 1859 as a mail-order tea and spice business run by merchants George H. Hartford and George F. Gilman. By 1930 the company had more than 16,000 stores and $1 billion in sales.

For four decades up to the 1960s, A&P was the largest retailer in the world, Levinson said.

A&P's decline began after president John A. Hartford and board chairman George L. Hartford died in the 1950s. In 1979 the Hartford family heirs and the John A. Hartford Foundation, which owned a majority of the stock, sold to the Tengelmann Group of Germany.

"The company just started shrinking," said Levinson, of Washington, D.C. "It used to be a coast-to-coast company... As it sold one operation after another, A&P became a regional supermarket in the New York area," he said.


A&P blamed its failure to turn around after bankruptcy on growing competition, on not closing 50 to 60 underperforming stores, and on not successfully reducing its pension obligations and other costs.

"They couldn't compete with retailers that were faster, cheaper and more creative," Levinson said.

Soon after filing for its second bankruptcy in July, A&P sought to sell all its stores. Some couldn't find buyers because the remaining lease period was short, the rent was too high, the locations were unfavorable, there was nearby competition, or the stores' physical condition was not up to par, real estate experts and union officials said.

Many employees at closing Waldbaum's and Pathmark stores worked their last day on Nov. 12. Others, such as cashiers, continue to work until the final stores close on Nov. 30.

Unions count toll

Mineola-based Local 338 of the United Food & Commercial Workers International Union
(UFCW) estimates that close to 1,200 of its members who worked at Waldbaum’s stores on Long Island lost their jobs, while another 1,000 people have been hired to work in other supermarkets.

“No matter what you do in this situation, it is never enough,” Local 338 president John Durso said. “We have been out there in the stores, talking to people and meeting with people to try to give them direction that they need to try to ease the burden.”

Westbury-based UFCW Local 1500, which had about 1,300 members at Pathmark stores on the Island, estimates that of the first figure 500 members were hired for other grocery jobs. At least three other unions represent other A&P employees on the Island.

Some of the workers at the stores purchased by supermarket chains have since been hired, including 1,000 employed by Stop & Shop, and 109 by King Kullen.

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Community impact

The closure of the Waldbaum’s in Melville poses hur- dles for Harold May, who is taking care of his 86-year-old mother in that community. “That was one of the only supermarkets in Melville itself,” said May, 55, a paralegal whose family has lived in Melville for more than 100 years. “Otherwise, we have to run into South Huntington or Plainview to do shopping.”

In Greenlawn, the closing of the Waldbaum’s has caused an uproar, particularly among the 500 residents of Paumanack Village, a federally subsidized independent-living community for low-income seniors and people with disabilities. They accessed the store by pathways allowing them to walk or take electric scooters.

Most of the residents, such as Dorothy Sundberg, 91, do not have cars. Now they may have to pay $15 round-trip for a taxi to go grocery shopping. “We shop every day or every other day,” said Sundberg, who has lived in the village for more than eight years. “It is an outing for us.”

Others like Catherine Hoesterey, 96, who is legally blind and uses a walker, have been stocking up on frozen meat, salt, canned milk, paper towels and toilet paper. “I need someone who would help me on the bus or taxi,” said Hoesterey, who has lived in the village for 24 years. “The girl in the Waldbaum’s store would take my shopping list and get a chair

for me to sit down, and she would get all my groceries . . . she would pack everything in the bags and kiss me goodbye.”

Suffolk County Legis. William Spencer, who represents the area, said, “We are trying to find other options to see what can be done to fill the gap like grocery delivery.”

A spokeswoman for Federal Realty, which operates the grocery-anchored shopping centers in Greenlawn and Melville, said it was too early to share its plans for the type of tenant it is pursuing in Melville. It noted that even though it is the landlord in Greenlawn, it was not the pur- chaser of the store lease.

Seeking replacement

Shanghai Enterprises, a real estate developer based in Jamaica, Queens, and the new owner of the Greenlawn location, is trying to get a supermarket operator for the store but has not reached any agree- ment yet, attorney Theodore A. Stamas said. Shanghai has been in talks with upscale grocery operator, a national drug chain and gym owners, but it may need to subordinate the 46,000-square-foot space, he said.

Union officials, residents and Waldbaum’s workers have accused Shanghai of try- ing to avoid hiring workers from the store. Stamas said the company’s managing mem- ber, Evangelos Gerasimou, testi- fied in an October court hearing that his client was not in the grocery business, but that opening a supermarket was not out of the question. “They know there is a need for a grocery store and supermarket there,” he said.

Smaller retailers at shopping centers losing their super- markets could also suffer. “It is never a good thing for a grocery-anchored shopping center to convert into a non- grocery-anchored shopping center,” said Jayson Siano, Sabre Real Estate Group man- aging principal, who repre- sents Stop & Shop. “The frequen- cy of the visit for a grocery store is higher than a retail store. It is about creating traffic for the other tenants in the shopping center.”

Landlords may also try to lease to smaller supermarket operators, gyms and depart- ment stores.

One way or another, change is coming. “There is not a lot of big-box space out there,” said Joshua Weinkrantz, president of the Northeast region for Kimco Realty. “This gives oppor- tunities for a lot of retailers who want to come into the New York market.”

The former Pathmark in Baldwin, one of 19 Pathmarks on LI closed due to A&P’s bankruptcy filing.