

Neighbors upset by store's closing

Grocery has many elderly customers

BY CAROLYN P. SMITH
News-Democrat

EAST ST. LOUIS — For Velma Cross, the Park 'N Shop is more than just a grocery store — it's a huge part of people's lives, especially the elderly.

"That's a neighborhood store. If you ran out of something, you could run down there and get it," said Cross, a longtime East St. Louis resident and former employee of the store. "It's going to really affect a lot of people. Seniors pay their bills there. They don't have any transportation, so they will really be affected."

The grocery store at 7600 State St. will close Sept. 27, prompting

residents to question why the city isn't doing more to keep the store open.

In 2005, the city offered tax increment financing incentives to a developer to keep open a Schnucks supermarket at 25th and State streets. As part of an \$8 million development at the corner, which included a gas station, fast-food restaurant, a car wash and other retail stores, the city agreed to pay \$1.8 million to developer Jim Koman of St. Louis.

In turn, Koman promised to use that money to buy the store site at 2511 State St. from the former owner, upgrade the building and then lease the store back to Schnucks at \$1 per year for at least five years.

The subsidized lease would en-

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Velma Cross, former employee of the East St. Louis Park 'N Shop store

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able the Schnucks store to compete more effectively against lower-priced competitors, according to city leaders.

Under the old lease, the supermarket had been paying \$500,000 in annual rent to the site's owner — an amount that matched its annual losses.

"Too many people live in the east end of East St. Louis for there not to be a full-line grocery store to service their needs," City Councilman Delbert Marion said of the Park 'N Shop site. "Those people depend on that store. Many seniors walk to and from the store with their little push carts."

Repeated attempts to reach store owner Merwyn Sher for comment were unsuccessful.

A visit to the store found the shelves nearly bare. Many residents said they don't think the doors will be open until Sept. 27.

"This is going to be a hell of a loss for the city and the people who live nearby. Now, the nearest store to them will be the Schnucks and Shop 'N Save stores at 25th and State streets," Marion said. "Some of the residents will not be able to get to the stores down there because of a lack of transportation."

Edith Moore, a resident in the area, is also very up-

set and outspoken on the store's closing.

"This is going to be a travesty. The people really need that store," she said.

Moore said the store is convenient for her to do some of her shopping. Moore said seniors in the area are going to be impacted the most.

Marion said he'd like to see city officials come together and do something to keep the store in the city.

"The city stepped up to help Schnucks when we were in danger of losing that store. If we can help a big conglomerate like that, surely we can do something for a small business that's been in the city for many, many years."

Mayor Alvin Parks said he met with the Homer Group, which operates the store, in 2007 and indicated the city would do whatever it could to help the store stay open.

He said the owners at the time said operating costs, including health insurance for employees and the cost of security, made it too expensive to remain open.

Parks said if Park 'N Shop does leave, he will move as quickly as possible to bring in a new grocery store to that area.

Contact reporter Carolyn P. Smith at 239-2503.