NNB News : 2013 : 10 : 15 : After Sweetbay...What Now?

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ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — In St. Petersburg, Fla.’s Midtown neighborhood the windows of the old Sweetbay Supermarket remain boarded up with black plywood over them, and the parking lot is still empty with just a few cars that visit the existing stores at the Tangerine Plaza.

In February of this year, Sweetbay, the Belgium-based corporate parent of a U.S. subsidiary of multiple supermarket chains, closed 33 of the 100-plus store chain in west central Florida taking the much-heralded Midtown location with them.

Nearby businesses in the plaza still continue to feel the loss from the grocery store chain’s sudden departure less than a year ago.

Ying Wu is an employee at Orient China Star, a restaurant that still is surviving, would like to see another grocery store. Their business has declined, and they are feeling the loss of Sweetbay. “We are a lot slower now,” Wu said.

The desire for another grocery store is on the wish list of not only the business owners but many of the residents who live close to this shopping center and now have to travel farther distances to get their groceries.

According to a study conducted in Philadelphia by the Journal of Marketing, “researchers found that 92% of the families interviewed did their main grocery shopping outside their neighborhood, going to larger stores and getting better prices.” Accessibility to grocery stores in Midtown is an issue to a lot of residents who don’t have access to a car and have to rely on a bus for their groceries.

Shakeenda Simmons is a Midtown resident lives two blocks away from the old site, and she would like to see a new grocery store. She misses having one so close to her home. “It’s a big inconvenience to travel to Dollar General,” she said. “And it’s tough with the smaller variety.”

The cost of visiting the neighborhood or corner stores also plays a factor because of price.

“A box of grits at the corner store is $5, but I can get a five-pound bag at Sweetbay for the same price,” Simmons said. “I hope Walmart is coming. I’ll be happy.”

Gretchen Calhoun is a Midtown resident who lives close to the shopping center. She was devastated when Sweetbay left. Her family now has to travel to Save-A-Lot and Walmart to get their groceries and has to take the bus to get there.

“Transportation is tough getting rides on the bus, and it’s not as convenient,” she said.

Rudolph Sweet, Sr., is a student and Midtown resident who is excited with all the redevelopment going on, but he would like to see a large grocery store return. “We need it,” he said.

As college building goes up, he’s a maestro in Midtown School strives to break the cycle of generational poverty
on in Midtown. He cites the recent makeover of the Manhattan Casino and the expansion of St. Petersburg College’s Midtown campus as proof that a new grocery store will move in, and he hopes that store will be a Neighborhood Walmart.

“Someone told me they were turning the Sweetbay into a Neighborhood Walmart,” he said. “I usually go to the Walmart on 34th St. S., which is a lot farther away.”

“The store staff needs to reflect the neighborhood customers,” Sweet said. He is skeptical and thinks that Walmart will bring employees from within.

“We need fresh produce and at a reasonable cost,” Calhoun said.

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