



Sears at Northwest Plaza to close

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Add Sears to the long exodus from Northwest Plaza.

It's the most recent — and perhaps final — blow to the decaying shopping center in St. Ann. When the Sears store closes on July 14, the mall will lose its last anchor.

A liquidation sale began on Friday. While the main Sears store will close, the auto center will remain open, said Chris Brathwaite, a Sears spokesman.

"Like all retailers, we evaluate our portfolio," Brathwaite said. "We open some stores and close some stores. ... We made a decision for business reasons not to renew the lease."

The store closing and liquidation signs that have popped up near the mall in recent days have come as no surprise to local residents and city officials.

"Everybody knew this day was coming," said Steve Erdelen, a St. Ann resident with the group called Let's Revitalize Northwest Plaza Now! "It's just another chapter in the story about another dead mall in this country."

Macy's closed its store at Northwest Plaza last month. Dillard's department store and Steve & Barry's clothing store shuttered a year and a half ago. Now, only a handful of stores remain in a largely empty mall with storefronts covered with black tarps.

By staying open, Sears was just "prolonging the agony anyway," Erdelen said. With it out of the way, he said, city officials and redevelopers can start with a clean slate to revive the area.

Matt Conley, St. Ann's city administrator, said the Sears departure was "unfortunate," but perhaps inevitable given the economy and the state of department stores.

"That store was designed in a day when department stores were king — and they no longer are," he said. "But in the long run, it will probably be better for the redevelopment efforts for Northwest Plaza."

The city is hoping to redevelop the site by tearing down most of the existing mall, with the exception of an office tower. The Sears store took up so much real estate that it would have been difficult to build around it, Conley said.

Now developers will have more flexibility to come up with different designs and uses for the

site, he said.

Last month, St. Ann selected G.J. Grewe Inc. of Crestwood to be the preferred redeveloper for the project. The developer said March 31 that it plans to add new stores and restaurants as well as offices and warehouses.

Proposals from developers are due at the end of the month, but Conley said he was expecting the one from G.J. Grewe to be the sole proposal. Conley added that Grewe has been in contact with Sears about the possibility of opening a smaller store in the new project.

But Brathwaite declined to speculate on that possibility. An official with G.J. Grewe did not return a call on Tuesday.

Bob Lewis of Development Strategies, an economic development consultant in St. Louis, said that with the Sears store gone, there won't be the "burden or expectation" that the new project will have to be anchored by a big store.

"Now they have more free rein perhaps to be a little more creative," he said.

Sears' 100 employees — most of whom work part time — were notified of the store's demise this month, Brathwaite said. He said the company hopes the employees will be able to apply for positions in other Sears locations. Sears has six other department stores in the St. Louis region.