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Local

An evolving industry is shuttering The City's grocery stores

Coldwell Banker / Mary Molinari

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SAN FRANCISCO - A group of toddlers stood holding signs in front of the Westfield San Francisco Centre on Monday asking residents to help keep their neighborhood grocery stores open.

The children, with their parents, stood protesting at the future home of a Bristol Farms, a high-end supermarket with ties to Albertsons. Five of The City's 28 major grocery stores have shut down in the last year, leaving some neighborhoods without a market to buy fresh produce, meat or dairy products.

And, according to some experts and community activists, the supermarket business is shifting toward larger, higher-end stores such as Whole Foods, Mollie Stone's and Bristol Farms.

In June, Albertsons announced it would be closing 37 Northern California stores, including one on Alemany Boulevard and another on Clement Street in San Francisco. The announcement came just a year after Cala Foods announced the closure of two stores in The City, one on Stanyan Street and another on Mission Street, and the sale of nine others.

Ron Lind, the president of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 428, which represents the employees of 13 of the Bay Area Albertsons stores scheduled to shut down in August, said the company is closing the older stores that do not "meet the model of the new 50,000-square-foot stores" that most major grocers want to build.

But Quyen Ha of Albertsons said the decision is purely based on economics.

"When we kind of took a step back and looked at our entire profile of stores, it was that they represented 22 percent of stores but only bring in 12 percent of sales," she said. "That was the major reason why."

Mark Brennan, the owner of the former Cala Foods site on Stanyan Street, said the future of grocery stores in The City is more in line with stores such as Whole Foods and Trader Joe's, which carry organic groceries.

"It seems like the grocery industry in San Francisco is going the way of gas stations," he said. "There used to be one on every corner but that's going by the wayside."

Regardless, residents living near one of the underperforming Albertsons say they have been betrayed by the grocer.

The supermarket opened on Alemany Boulevard in March 2002 on the heels of a major redevelopment project that transformed the downtrodden shopping center into a retail space with five stores on the ground level and 370 apartments above them. Albertsons is abandoning the site and is now looking to sublease. It has a lease on the site until 2027.

"How will we get them to understand they cannot just up and close the Albertsons that means so much to everybody," said Giselle Quezada, a resident who lives near the store.

Many residents are elderly or low-income and cannot afford to travel close to three miles to the closest supermarket, according to Quezada. At a rally on Monday, residents asked for Albertsons to help shuttle residents to the new store. In June, Supervisor Gerardo Sandoval pushed a measure through the Board of

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Supervisors to ask Albertsons to stay open or find a replacement store.

But nowadays there is not much on the shelves that would indicate the store might reverse direction. Bright yellow signs cover the windows and litter the aisles announcing, "everything must go" by the end of the month.

Upper Haight split over fate of vacated Cala site

The closing of an aging Cala Foods store in the Upper Haight has residents divided over what they would like to see replace the lone grocery store in the neighborhood.

In late May, Cala Foods closed its doors on Stanyan Street and opened a large window of speculation. Few in the neighborhood argue that they need another supermarket, but which one comes there, and how, is a matter of debate.

"This is the first time in 45 years there will not be a full-service grocery store," said Mark Brennan, the owner of the former Cala site.

Brennan's family took over the property in 1991 and has plans to demolish the site, along with an adjacent parking lot, and construct a new store with about 176 underground parking spots and 50 to 60 residential units above the store.

He said Whole Foods is the only grocer willing to wait for the development of the site, which could take more than four years, as he is still waiting for approval from The City to tear down the vacant building. While Brennan redevelops, residents will have to depend on small neighborhood grocers or travel half a mile to the Albertsons on Fulton Street.

But some residents complain Whole Foods is too expensive and would prefer to see a Trader Joe's or a Rainbow Grocery come in, while others are concerned about traffic problems on the already busy intersection of Haight and

Stanyan streets.

"If there was underground parking I wouldn't want to see the entrance on Stanyan because Stanyan and Page get pretty clogged up," said Dennis Oliver, whose home shares a wall with the Cala site.

Others are actually rolling out the welcome mat for Whole Foods.

"We are pleased with the planned development of much-needed additional housing," said Cheryl Brodie, president of the Haight Ashbury Improvement Association. "The below-ground parking proposed is a welcome alternative to the

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current parking lot fronting the building.”

Brennan said there was a plan to bring a Berkeley-based grocery onto the lot temporarily, but that fell through because it took too long to get a conditional use permit from The City. And while waiting for the permit, Cala Foods auctioned off vital store fixtures, such as freezers, that would be needed for any temporary store.

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