



## Albertsons To Keep Center Open

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PLANT CITY - The huge distribution center that Albertsons has operated here for 15 years will continue serving the grocery chain's remaining Florida stores following the August layoff of 121 workers, a company spokesman said.

The Idaho-based grocery chain announced June 9 it is selling more than half its 93 Florida stores to Publix Super Markets and that the Plant City crew of warehouse workers and truck drivers would be greatly reduced.

The 1.1-million-square-foot warehouse near Plant City Stadium employs more than 400 workers, said Shane McEntarffer, spokesman for the grocery's Florida division office in Lake Mary.

"They'll have jobs for 60 days, and then severance-eligible employees will receive severance," he said. Severance terms were not disclosed.

Additionally, to help the displaced workers find employment, Albertsons is working with Workforce Florida, a state labor commission, as well as with prospective local employers, he said.

The 121 workers affected by the mass layoff cover all levels, from salaried administrators to forklift operators, truck drivers and other operations staff, McEntarffer said. Many of the employees live in the Plant City-Lakeland area, McEntarffer said.

Simple math necessitates the layoffs, he said. With Albertsons selling off 50 percent of its Florida stores, the reduction equates to fewer workers needed to maintain operations at the grocer's warehouse off Park Road, McEntarffer said.

"We're going to be operating the remaining 44 stores in Florida and will continue district operations in Plant City, as well in the Lake Mary division office," he said.

Mayor Rick Lott, who received a June 9 fax informing him of the planned layoffs and announced the cutbacks at that night's city commission meeting, said the city is doing what it can to spread the word about the availability of the laid-off workers.

That includes tapping the resources of the Tampa Bay Workforce Alliance, which operates a

Plant City office and works with businesses throughout the Tampa Bay area to help applicants find local jobs, Lott said.

The good news is that Albertsons will continue to operate the Plant City distribution center, he said. Plant City is "faring better than other areas" during the economic downturn, the mayor said, saying one reason may be that much of the local light industry is food-based.

Albertsons took over the shopping-mall-sized warehouse on the city's east side in February 1993 after it sat vacant for more than two years. Albertsons paid \$17.5 million for the property and spent an additional \$9.9 million on expansion and renovation.

The warehouse became the third-largest of the company's 10 major U.S. distribution centers.

Ames Department Stores previously owned and operated the sprawling warehouse, opened in mid-1988 by the discount retail chain Zayre.

The warehouse was acquired by Ames when the Connecticut-based retailer bought all 80 Zayre discount retail stores in Florida in October 1988.

In April 1990, Ames filed for protection from creditors under Chapter 11 of the U.S. Bankruptcy Code and, four months later, closed its Plant City warehouse and all its Florida stores.

Through foreclosure, the vacant warehouse was eventually acquired by a financial group headed by Principal Mutual Life, Des Moines, Iowa.

The Albertsons cutback marks Plant City's third large layoff in two months.

James Hardie Building Products laid off 49 full-time and 30 part-time workers in late April, citing the downturn in the construction industry. The layoff left the plant on Woodrow Wilson Street with a workforce of about 180.

A few weeks earlier, Pilgrim's Pride announced it would close its Plant City distribution center on Jim Johnson Road and lay off 84 workers in May. The center is one of six facilities closing among the company's 13 U.S. distribution centers.

The shutdowns were attributed to the rising cost of feed ingredients.

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