

## Business

# A third of Waldbaum's, Pathmarks remain vacant on Long Island

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It has been more than a year since all 51 Waldbaum's and Pathmark supermarkets on Long Island closed as the parent company Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Co. went bankrupt. Some stores were snapped up by other grocers, but about a third remain vacant, causing hardship for around 1,500 former workers, like Steven Kopejna, of Bohemia, who haven't found replacement jobs yet. Kopezna who worked for Pathmark nearly 35 years is now facing foreclosure. (Credit: Newsday / John Paraskevas)

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Three empty locations may get new stores this year
- 1,500 former employees are still looking for work

More than a year after all 51 Waldbaum's and Pathmark supermarkets closed on Long Island, one third of the stores remain vacant, creating disruption for shoppers, small businesses nearby and about 1,500 former workers who haven't found replacement jobs yet.

Three of the empty locations may get grocery stores this year.

The stores' owner, the Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Co. of Montvale, New Jersey, founded in 1859 as a mail-order tea and spice business, had filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in July 2015, and subsequently halted operation.

The 51 Waldbaum's and Pathmark stores shuttered by the bankruptcy all closed by November 2015. Some other locations had closed before the bankruptcy.

Thirty-four of the 51 stores have been taken over by other supermarkets, including 10 by Best Market, nine by Stop & Shop, four by ShopRite, four by Key Food and one by King Kullen, among others.

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Another former Pathmark location in Centereach was grabbed by retail discount chain Ocean State Job Lot.

The sale of A&P's stores provided a rare chance for competing grocers to expand quickly in Nassau and Suffolk counties. Finding large, open retail space can be difficult here.

“Long Island is usually a market that is hard to get into,” said Kenneth Schuckman, president of Lake Success-based Schuckman Realty, whose company specializes in supermarket leases. “There has never been more opportunity to tap into the Long Island market.”

For Best Market, “This was a great opportunity,” said Rebecca Philbert, president and chief executive of the Bethpage-based, family-owned company. The grocery

chain, with a total of 30 stores, spent more than \$30 million to remodel the stores it acquired from A&P.

“It was one of those once-in-a-lifetime opportunities for us as a small company to grow and to identify great real estate opportunities in great communities that need a supermarket.”



### **‘Vacant for a reason’**

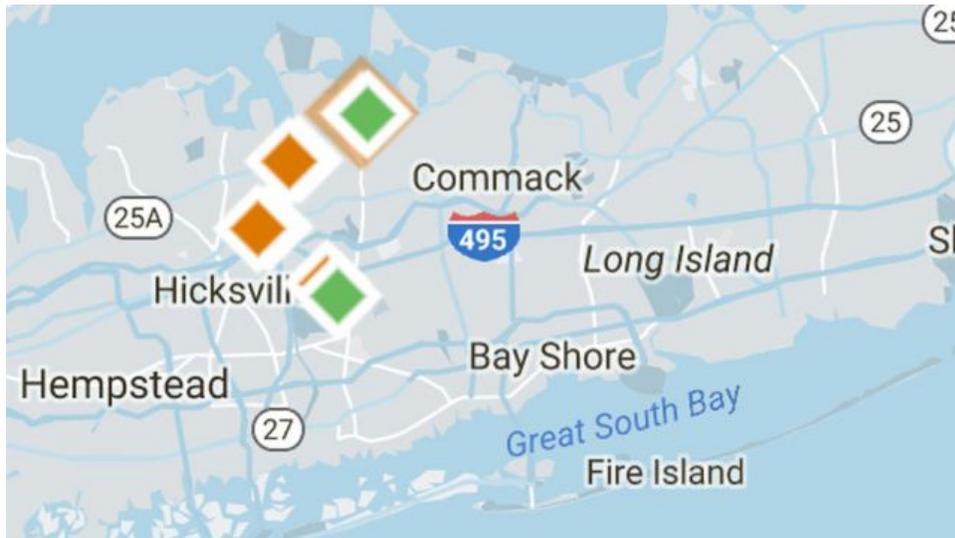
Most of the remaining empty sites, however, are “vacant for a reason,” said Joseph Brown, senior vice president of Bethpage-based King Kullen, a family-owned company, which took over the former Waldbaum’s in North Patchogue. “Either it is not a good location or the existing lease doesn’t make sense to take advantage of.

“But we’re always looking for new locations. We are going to see how these competitors that have taken over these leases shake out over time and see if anything becomes available,” Brown said.

The empty former Pathmark stores are in Baldwin, Bay Shore, Dix Hills, Holbrook, Massapequa, North Babylon, Patchogue and Port Jefferson.

The former Waldbaum's stores that remain vacant are in Carle Place, East Meadow, East Setauket, Hauppauge, Lindenhurst, Oceanside, Riverhead and Stony Brook.

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Several of the landlords and brokers of the vacant stores said they were negotiating with potential tenants, including supermarkets and other retailers, and for other uses such as residences, medical facilities and health clubs.

“Waldbaum’s and Pathmark had great real estate,” said Faith Hope Consolo, chairwoman of the Manhattan-based real estate firm Douglas Elliman’s Retail Group. “The size of the stores that have become available gives opportunities” to other kinds of retailers.

Three of the empty stores may be replaced by supermarkets this year.

A Key Food operator bought the former Pathmark on Grand Avenue in Baldwin for \$20 million last month, said Jeremy Isaacs, a broker at Jericho-based Ripco Real Estate who was involved in the deal.

Key Food is also expected to take over 32,000 square feet of the former 52,211-square-foot Pathmark supermarket in Carman's Plaza in Massapequa, Schuckman said. A major national tenant could potentially move into the rest of the space, he said.



A spokeswoman for Key Food declined to comment about the Baldwin and Massapequa locations.

### **ShopRite eyes store**

ShopRite, a trademark of Keasbey, New Jersey-based Wakefern Food Corp., a cooperative of retailer-owned stores, is looking to possibly replace the former 48,300-square-foot Pathmark on Nesconset Highway in Port Jefferson. ShopRite is considering signing a lease to take over 68,428 square feet of the shopping center.

“We do have interest in that site . . . but nothing is final yet,” ShopRite spokeswoman Karen Meleta said.

Many of A&P’s 5,000-plus workers on Long Island were hired at successor grocery stores, including Stop & Shop.

Stop & Shop hired more than 950 former employees of A&P-owned stores to work at the nine Long Island stores it acquired from A&P, which brought its total stores on the Island to 49.

“We recognized their seniority that they had with A&P, and they kept their pay,” said Don Sussman, president of the New York Metro Division of Stop & Shop.

“We kept the associates in those stores, but we did some outside hiring.”

More than 900 former Pathmark and Waldbaum’s employees retired, according to United Food & Commercial Workers International Union Local 338, the Mineola-based representative of Waldbaum’s workers, and Local 1500, the Westbury-based representative of Pathmark employees. Both unions said they are still working to find jobs for unemployed former members.

“We were fortunate that a lot of people were of age, so they took their pensions,” Local 1500 president Tony Speelman said. “Some people took an early retirement because they had no choice.”

### **35 years at Pathmark**

Steve Kopejzna, 56, of Bohemia, a former department manager at the Pathmark in Bay Shore, is among the 1,500 still looking for work. His wife, Victoria, is also unemployed. The father of three, who worked with Pathmark for 35 years, retired

with a \$1,500-a-month pension. Now, his home of 21 years is in foreclosure, and he hopes to sell it to pay back the bank, he said.

Kopejzna said he wants to get his home business, which sells air-purification, water-filtration and energy-saving devices, off the ground. Since banks wouldn't fund him, he started a GoFundMe campaign, hoping to raise \$10,000.

"I feel that my family is worth saving," said Kopejzna, adding that he is a Scoutmaster for a local Boy Scouts Troop and his wife is involved with the Cub and Boy Scouts. "We enjoy giving back to our community and are in danger of losing everything."

For John Candia, 29, of East Meadow, the shutdown of the Waldbaum's in Jericho — now an Hmart supermarket — was especially difficult. Candia, who was a part-time customer service supervisor, has Asperger syndrome, a condition on the autism spectrum that can cause people to have difficulty with social interactions and nonverbal communication.

Candia, who worked for the chain for 11 years, was unemployed for a year until he found a part-time job in November at a Kohl's store unloading trucks and sorting through merchandise. A&P gave him \$600 in severance pay, and he received unemployment benefits for six months, Candia said.

"It was really difficult, the period of time from when I lost that job until I found this job," Candia said. "I had actually stopped applying for jobs because I would get so much anxiety. I still don't go to that area because it is hard."

Small-business owners at shopping centers that lost their supermarkets also have suffered.

## **20% drop in revenue**

Ana Freire, owner of Dutch Girl Cleaners, near the former Pathmark in the Sun Vet Mall in Holbrook, said her revenue has dropped about 20 percent.

“We are dying for a supermarket to come in,” said Freire, who has owned the store for three years. “Thank God my loyal customers are still coming in, but there is no traffic anymore.”

The manager of Sun Vet Mall, Norman Schefer, of Marvin L. Linder Associates in North Merrick, said he got proposals for the space, but nothing has developed yet.

To offset small tenants’ losses and stop store vacancy rates from going up, landlords sometimes offer temporary rent reductions, brokers said. If landlords lose the anchor retailer, tenants can pay less rent until the vacancy is filled, they said.

The loss of Waldbaum’s and Pathmark required some residents to drive a few more miles for groceries. For others without cars, the closures created hardships.

Most of the vacant stores have had incidents reported to the police, including property damage, graffiti, commercial alarms, and “unknown persons” sleeping at the locations, according to the Nassau County, Suffolk County and Riverhead Town police departments.

The former Waldbaum’s on East Hoffman Avenue in Lindenhurst, across the street from the LIRR train station, has had at least 20 reported incidents, including 12 disturbances, one burglary and two commercial alarms, Suffolk police said.

“We did have a problem in Lindenhurst,” said broker Isaacs, who represents the landlords of six former Pathmarks and Waldbaum’s. “Some kids came and broke the windows. The police monitor it, we close off the parking lot and install plywood to protect the storefront.”

Many of the vacant stores still have cash registers, shopping carts and shelves that could be used by grocery tenants. But the best use for some of the properties may no longer be supermarkets, Schuckman said.

“Eventually the vacant stores will be absorbed or repurposed,” he said.