



Gallup Express MAY provide alternate transportation

The entire one-story Downtown Plaza Shopping Center structure is unsafe for occupancy and the Lowe's grocery store and Subway outlets probably won't open until a repair or new structure is built, officials familiar with the situation said.

C.B. Strain, director of the city planning and development department, said the grocery store and the other stores located within the plaza were red-tagged by the city on April 20.

"There was an engineering report on the structure of the building and that report indicates that the entire structure is not safe," Strain said. "We red-tagged it. At this point, either repairs have to be made or the entire building has to be rebuilt." The notices placed on the buildings by city code enforcement say "Do Not Enter" and "Unsafe to Occupy."

An engineering report done by Quiroga Pfeiffer Engineering Corporation of Albuquerque states that multiple life safety issues exist at Lowe's. The report, done on behalf of Texas-based Lowe's, states that there is movement in a back retaining wall and large cracks adorn interior supporting walls.

"In our opinion, the building should not be occupied until the steel support beam and the retaining wall above the one-story building can be shored up to ensure that neither will collapse," the report concludes.

A telephone call to Lowe's headquarters in Amarillo, Texas, resulted in a receptionist referring to a news release put out last month by Lowe's Chief Executive Officer Roger Lowe, Jr.

"The safety of our customers and our employees is of utmost importance and we have transferred all of our employees from our store on West Aztec to one of the surrounding locations in Gallup until further details are known." The release goes on to say that a re-opening of the shopping center depends on a further analysis of the engineering report. There are four Lowe's locations in greater McKinley County.

Joe Di Gregorio, whose family owned and operated California Supermarkets, before the chain was sold to Lowe's in 2006, still maintains a back business office at Lowe's Downtown Plaza. He said the whole episode hit him like a ton of bricks.

"I don't think anybody saw this coming," Di Gregorio said. "I'm just as surprised as anybody by this."

A Gallup native, Di Gregorio said the city notified the businesses of the need to vacate. He said the Gallup Catholic Church Diocese owns the property that Lowe's and the other buildings on the parcel. The entire West Aztec Avenue site was once the home of Sacred Heart Cathedral School before that entity changed its name and moved across town.

The Gallup Diocese did not return repeated phone calls seeking comment about the situation. But the closure has hit the Chihuahita community hard. Chihuahita borders the Downtown Plaza.

“My family has been going there for more than 40 years,” Gallup City Councilor, and Gallup native, Linda Garcia said. The shopping center is part of Garcia’s council district. “We are working with Gallup Express to see if they can provide transportation to people who don’t have vehicles. We’re all very surprised by this.”

Garcia said half of the residents of Chihuahita don’t own cars. She said she hopes the situation can be fixed soon.

The city has been going through some busted water mains in the Downtown Plaza area, but Gallup Water and Sanitation Director Dennis Romero said the situations are not connected.

“One is not associated to the other,” Romero said. “The water breaks are close to being fixed.”

By Bernie Dotson
Sun Correspondent