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JAMAICA PLAIN

Hi-Lo workers receive offers of help from city, Whole Foods

Posted by Matt Rocheleau January 31, 2011 04:50 PM

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Employees of the iconic grocery store Hi-Lo Foods, which will [close to make way](#) for a Whole Foods, are receiving a helping hand from the city to sort out their uncertain futures.

While the Texas-based supermarket company is at least several months away from opening the Jamaica Plain space, Whole Foods says it is granting Hi-Lo employees “top priority” for job interviews at its other, existing chains.

The remaining members of Hi-Lo’s 45-person staff – about half have left since news of the closure broke – will be laid off when the [nearly five-decade-old store](#) permanently ceases operation. The store’s final date has not yet been determined, but it is expected to be sometime next week, according to store employees.

Local officials held a [meeting last week](#) with Hi-Lo employees to help them apply for unemployment benefits and also to aid them as they seek new jobs, according to the mayor’s office. The officials who attended the Friday meeting were not immediately available to comment Monday, the office said.

Whole Foods officials were also present to ensure they were aware of the company’s offer: “We have guaranteed top priority for interviews for Hi-Lo employees at any of our facilities,” spokeswoman Heather McCready said.

The three closest existing chains are on Westland Avenue in the Back Bay, in the Charles River Plaza in Beacon Hill and on Washington Street in Brighton, she said.

Another blog, [juliorvarela.com](#), made many of the same points.

Whole Foods officials will not have access to the building at 415 Centre St. until late March. Only then can the company can fully assess how it plans to alter the space, determine timetables on when the store will begin its hiring process and when it will open, McCready said. Whether the company may need to receive additional permitting or other city approval for the store will also not be known until renovation plans are cemented.

The organic-specialty grocer has no plans to make any major, structural changes, she said, and the company will leave a painted mural on the back of the building’s exterior intact.

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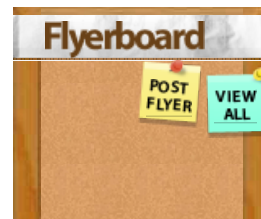
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Painted in 1984 by Puerto Rican artist Rafael Rivera Garcia and renovated several years ago by a youth program, the mural depicts three mythical figures of the Taino Indians who were essentially wiped out by the mid-1500s after Spanish settlers arrived. Neighborhood residents have expressed concern that Whole Foods might remove or cover the artwork.

"We will not change the footprint of the building," said McCready. "We're doing our best to keep the basics and the structure of the building as they are."

Several months prior to opening, the company will begin a job-screening process likely setting up an on-site trailer to attract local residents to apply.

"We definitely want to hire members from the community," she said, adding that roughly 70 of the 100 employees Whole Foods plans to hire will be given full-time status with benefits.

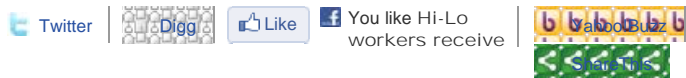
Company officials have been communicating with local officials to work on other community concerns, McCready added. A major worry has been that the unique stock of Latin foods that Hi-Lo carries, including items that were very rare or exclusive to Hi-Lo, will not appear on Whole Foods' shelves.

"It's definitely our goal to be able to provide the food the community wants to buy," she said. "It's a process for us and one that will take us through when we open our doors."

The company's newly signed lease in Jamaica Plain has also sparked debate over what, if anything, the move signals about the neighborhood's current state and future.

"Nationwide, Whole Foods has opened up in communities that were really identical to Jamaica Plain," said the spokeswoman. "We've seen our stores be successful in a number of communities with varying demographics and income levels and those stores reflect the community around them."

E-mail Matt Rocheleau at mjrochele@gmail.com.



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