

"This all unfolded quite clumsily," said O'Malley, who was elected in November to the city council seat overseeing several Hub neighborhoods including his native Jamaica Plain.

"Couldn't they have done anything better to give increased, advanced notice," to Hi-Lo employees, Sanchez said. "Some of these workers devoted their lives to this company."

"It's unfortunate for a company that has been in the community for so long to go out like this," added the Mission Hill native, who routinely shopped at Hi-Lo. "Everybody has always thought [the store's longtime manager] was the owner of the company because he was the only face you saw ... I guess [Knapp Foods] always wanted to keep a low profile coming in and getting out."

Hi-Lo's manager was reached by phone Tuesday at the store, which is expected to cease operation by the end of next week if not sooner, but said he is not allowed to comment.

"[He's] is in a difficult position, too because he's managing the store's closure, but he's not the spokesman of the [Knapp] company," Sanchez said.

Whole Foods spokeswoman Heather McCready declined to comment directly on the frustration with Knapp Foods that public officials have expressed.

"Our relationship with Knapp Foods is simply that of the building owner and Whole Foods is the lessee of the building," she said.

As for Whole Foods' involvement, local public officials said they are pleased with the national supermarket's openness and outreach thus far, and will continue to closely monitor that Whole Foods follows through with the commitments it has made.

Officials said the Texas-based chain has been communicating regularly with public officials and community groups, including attending a meeting last week to explain and help Hi-Lo employees apply for unemployment benefits and also to aid them as they seek new jobs.

Since the day Hi-Lo employees were notified they would be laid off, "We have guaranteed top priority for interviews for Hi-Lo employees at any of our facilities," McCready said Monday.

Sanchez said he has spoken to a few Hi-Lo workers who have been contacted by the company to arrange for interviews, including one employee in particular who has been identified as a top candidate for a position at nearby Whole Foods.

The organic-specialty grocer said there are job openings at area stores. But the number of openings "is hard to [quantify] because it changes day to day," McCready said. "A fair amount of them are available."

"In terms of what Whole Foods is doing, I see some activity. Though, they've made it clear about what they cannot guarantee," said Sanchez, who has asked that Whole Foods include a focus on offering affordable produce at the future JP store. "They've showed they're going to make a genuine effort ... Up to this point they're doing everything they said they would."

O'Malley also said he has been happy with the productivity from talks with Whole Foods thus far.

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
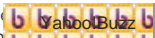

"I would like to get Whole Foods to commit they will hire a certain percentage, if not all, of the Hi-Lo workers," he said. "I feel good, but I would like to get to see people actually getting jobs. And, if they don't I'd like to know why."

He said if workers are not hired because they do not speak English at a sufficient enough level, he would want to know so he could seek ways to train them in English in hopes they could improve their job prospects with Whole Foods or with another employer.

McCready said the level of English proficiency needed depends on the position and the store someone applies to, but "there are certainly positions for varying levels of English-speaking ability."

At-large City Councilor Ayanna Pressley returned a phone call Tuesday, but the call was missed by a Boston.com reporter. She was not immediately available when contacted again.

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

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