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- news
- events
- discussions
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## Owner: Employee, community well-being integral in Hi-Lo decision

Posted by Matt Rocheleau February 3, 2011 12:59 PM

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

After public officials expressed frustration with Knapp Foods, Inc. earlier this week, the company's president said today that the wellbeing of its grocery store employees, and the local community, was an integral part of its decision to lease the Hi-Lo Foods property to a national supermarket chain.

Stephen Knapp reiterated what he [told the Globe](#) about two weeks ago – that the move to close the more than four-decade-old Hyde Square grocery store was primarily based on an aging management team that included members heading into their 70s.

He declined to comment on [discontent expressed Tuesday](#) by several local elected officials, who said Knapp Foods should do more to help Hi-Lo's approximate 45 employees.

However, Knapp said his business, based in Newton, has "acted appropriately" throughout the process, responded to all calls from the city that he is aware of and expressed confidence in Whole Foods' efforts to work with and consider employing those workers facing an uncertain future.

During negotiations with Whole Foods, making efforts to help re-employ the Hi-Lo workers "was definitely a part of the discussion all along. And, they were extremely receptive from the beginning," Knapp said by phone Thursday responding to a press queries made to his company earlier this week. "Our employees were always a part of the talks of this transaction."

City and state officials are [working to assist Hi-Lo employees'](#) attempts at reemployment, including with Whole Foods, which has committed to interviewing any of those workers who are interested in seeking jobs at existing Whole Foods chains.

Officials said attempts to identify all of the Hi-Lo employees to aid them in arranging interviews with Whole Foods had been stifled by a lack of cooperation on the Knapp company's behalf; but the president of Knapp said he was not aware of inquiries about the Hi-Lo employees' identities.

"I think the communication between Whole Foods and Hi-Lo employees is an ongoing process," he said, adding that, if contacted, "we will certainly do what we can to help facilitate the process."

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Public officials, when reached Tuesday, also expressed concern over the store's abrupt closure and questioned why the Knapp company had not provided more of a warning to store employees.

"We felt we were protecting our employees for as long as possible until there was a definitive direction for our company," said Knapp, adding that he felt releasing information about a possible closure and its timing would have been more unnerving and damaging for employees if the decision to close and lease the property to Whole Foods had not gone through.

Knapp said employees were gathered at the store for a meeting to discuss the situation as soon as the company felt confident enough that the move would not fall through, and that it was even slightly before when the move was finalized in writing.

The company president declined to discuss terms of the lease with Whole Foods or the Hi-Lo store's financial status.

The store is expected to close by the end of next week, according to previous discussions with employees, and Knapp said pinning down a final date will depend on how smooth the closing process goes. Workers have said around half of the 45 employees continue to work there, but Knapp declined to comment on why some of the others are no longer working.

"We feel we have acted appropriately," he said. "This is a private business deal and we think [Whole Foods] will be a great addition to the community."

Whole Foods has said it plans to employ around 100 workers, including about 70 full-time with benefits, once it opens the store after several months of renovating.

"I don't know how that can be perceived as anything but positive," Knapp said. "I imagine [Whole Foods] might have more flexibility in terms of wages and opportunities for advancement."

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