Main Street Dillard’s shut down

Fate of world’s longest store a mystery

By CHAD CALDER
 Advocate business writer

Company officials said last summer that the store would be closed by November, but it has remained open as a clearance center until this weekend. Even the store’s employees said they had not been told when the day would come.

The second question — what’s next for the “World’s Longest Department Store” — is as much a mystery as ever, however. On Monday, a manager working at the store declined to comment, leaving the hand-written “Closed” signs on the doors to speak for themselves.

A call to the company’s Little Rock, Ark., headquarters was not returned. Steve Rennhoff, store manager with the Dillard’s at the Mall of Louisiana, confirmed that employees of the Main Street location had been offered jobs at Dillard’s stores at the Mall of Louisiana and the Mall at Cortana.

He said he could not comment further. In recent months, published news reports have said the store may be donated to the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, though the foundation has been mum on the issue.

Executive Vice President Hans Dekker declined to comment Monday.

Don Powers, executive vice president of The Chamber of Greater Baton Rouge, said...
the sooner the building can be put back into commerce, the better.

“It's never good to have stores close,” he said. “It's going to be a loss to the community.”

Powers said that even if a deal isn’t struck with the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, the best use for the location would be the one that creates the most jobs, whether it comes back as a department store or becomes commercial office space, like a call center.

“What you don’t want to happen is to have a building that size stay vacant,” he said. “You would hope something is on the drawing boards. One would hope you could get something going for the building as soon as possible.”

Powers added that with the local commercial real estate market booming, he is confident it won't be long before something happens.

Davis Rhorer, executive director of the Downtown Development District, said he would like to see another retailer come in.

He pointed out a recent study commissioned by Plan Baton Rouge, which said the nearby downtown area could support another 84,000 square feet of retail development.

For whatever reason, however, Dillard's had decided the spot wasn't right for it.

The Main Street location had become a clearance center after Dillard's closed its location at the former Bon Marché mall in February 1999, telling developers there it had too many stores in Baton Rouge.

The Main Street store got its start when brothers Bernard and Jake Godchaux moved their variety store there in 1925.

Godchaux's, as it was then known, was already well on its way to becoming a local retail institution when Erich Sternberg bought the store in 1945.

Sternberg, a Jewish immigrant who fled Nazi Germany in the 1930s, ran the store with his family.

Godchaux's endeared itself further to the community in the following years. It was not uncommon for salesmen to open the store after hours to accommodate customers,