

Magruder's to sell its remaining stores in Washington region

By [Jonathan O'Connell](#), Published: January 16

For more than a week, loyal shoppers of Magruder's supermarkets took note of the emptying shelves.

Where was the fresh produce they treasured? Where were the choices of fine meats?

They [feared the worst](#), and so the rumor mill took off quickly. The somewhat shabby but cozily familiar grocers were going the way of so many neighborhood stores before them.



On Wednesday, the [announcement](#) many shoppers had dreaded came: Magruder's was selling its stores. In fact, the Connecticut Avenue store had already been sold, and owners were working to sell the stores in Alexandria, Gaithersburg, Rockville and Vienna.

“We are currently in negotiations to sell the remaining four locations to a group who wishes to purchase

the individual stores and to reopen them as quickly as possible, and we are working diligently with all parties involved,” Gary Bortnick, the chain's vice president, said in a written statement.

The Rockville-based chain, which first opened its doors in 1875, quickly began offering 50 percent off remaining items, prompting a rush of bargain shoppers amid the sadness at the demise of one the region's last local- and family-owned grocers.

At the Alexandria store off Seminary Road, shoppers left with carts piled high with cartons of beer, gallon jugs of milk and several whole chickens. Packages of Starbucks coffee were sold out, the Parmesan cheese specials were gone, and the meats and orange juice were dwindling.

“I'm just shocked,” said Virginia Holmes-Lacy, who lives near the Magruder's there. “The prices are good, and it's a family store — you get what you want, you get a little conversation, because I'm a talker.”

At the Chevy Chase store, which Bortnick said would remain open under the Magruder's name, Toni Miller, 62, said she had been going there for 25 years for the fresh produce, adult

beverages, and the friendly and familiar staff. “It’s just a small-town grocery store, or a general store really, but with liquor,” she said.

Magruder’s has been co-owned by two local families since 1967, when [Louis H. Fanaroff](#) and brother-in-law Stanford Steppa bought two small groceries. By the time Fanaroff died in 2005, there were 10 stores.

But in the past decade, as the Washington area [experienced a demographic boom](#) driven by 20-somethings, competition to sell groceries has tightened considerably with Safeway, Giant, Wegmans, Harris Teeter, Trader Joe’s, Whole Foods and Fresh Market all renovating old stores or opening new ones.

In addition to boasting gleaming new buildings — some of them on Magruder’s turf — competitors offered more prepared foods, accepted online orders and promoted deals via social media. Magruder’s was forced to [close stores in Cleveland Park](#), Silver Spring, Annandale and Falls Church.

Bob Gorland, of New Jersey-based grocery store consulting firm Matthew P. Casey and Associates, said Magruder’s hasn’t kept up with the times. “They’ve been struggling for years, and many of the stores have had declining sales bases basically because of extensive competition,” he said.

As recently as last week, Bortnick said Magruder’s would not be closing more stores. But in his statement Wednesday, Bortnick said it was time for his family to move on. He did not name the buyers of the stores.

He did, however, thank Magruder’s “incredible management staff, our hardworking United Food and Commercial Unionized employees, our outstanding vendors and suppliers and, of course, the most unbelievably dedicated and loyal customers that have allowed us to remain in business these past 46 years.”

At least 80-85 employees are expected to lose their jobs. Among them is Denis Trana, who has worked for 14 years as a meat cutter in the Chevy Chase store. By Wednesday afternoon, Trana, a father of three, had no meat left to cut and was waiting to hear when his last day would be.

“I couldn’t tell you an exact date because they haven’t told us,” he said. “We haven’t had a meeting or anything like that. We never got a notice about what was going on.”

Mark Federici, president of UFCW Local 400, said the union would be assisting workers in looking for jobs. Magruder’s has “been a part of our landscape and the landscape of Washington, D.C., for a very long time,” he said. “It’s a sad day.”

Patricia Sullivan and James Arkin contributed to this report.

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