



## Five years later, San Fernando residents still miss the historic J.C.Penney's

By Monica Rodriguez

Along the San Fernando outlet mall, where a beloved J.C.Penney store closed down five years ago and the building still stands empty, merchants have seen a decrease of customers to their own shops and they worry about their businesses.

“J.C.Penney used to bring in a lot of people,” said Pablo Solis store owner of Jim’s Western Wear. When the J.C.Penney closed down it “stopped a lot of traffic from coming into San Fernando,” he added.

Solis’ store is located on San Fernando Road and sells western wear such as cowboy hats, and denim jeans. On a recent Saturday afternoon, Solis wore a flannel shirt and took care of a customer looking to buy a cowboy hat. He had concerns for the other businesses as well, because some stores closed down along the three-block street mall, as a result of the lost foot traffic after the closure of Penney’s, he noted. Solis said his business had seen a decrease in customers but, he added, his motto is “business as usual.”

His concerns were the same for many merchants along the outdoor, street mall, where most businesses catered for decades to the mostly Hispanic community. More than a dozen shops sell and make detailed hand stitched, lace wedding dresses with sweetheart necklines, ceremonial baptism garb, and ballroom quinceanera gowns.

Other businesses are well known mom and pop shops such as restaurants that serve traditional Mexican food, a bakery that sell home-made style tamales, bolillos, conchas and pan dulces. Tucked along the way are also an electronic store, furniture and vintage clothing shops.

In the City of San Fernando, which is famous for its Catholic Mission and a couple of its historical homes built in the 1800s, the former J.C.Penney had a long history.

“Penney’s first came to San Fernando in 1920, moving only once to a 60,000-square-foot building near the northwest corner of San Fernando Road and San Fernando Mission Boulevard in 1953,” according to a 2012 story in the Daily News.

It was the area’s only formal department store, where residents in the community could shop for back-to-school clothing, gifts for family members, and where teens bought jeans and tank tops.

But once the residents of San Fernando learned their Penney’s was closing they went into action to try and save their beloved store. A local group was able to attract celebrities such as George Lopez, who created an online video urging the company not to close the store. The community also reached out to Ellen DeGeneres, who was a spokeswoman for Penney’s. But the talk show host didn’t respond, according to published reports. San Fernando residents also gathered 2,000 signatures online and they rallied against the closure of the store with signs and chants, according to news reports.

They also reached out to Penney’s Company corporate offices, but received no response, according to news reports.

Still, the historical San Fernando J.C.Penney store closed for business in 2012, without much of an explanation.

Five years later, the building still stands vacant.

Building owner, Severyn Aszkenazy, of Aszkenazy Development, INC. did not respond to repeated requests for an interview about what will happen to the iconic site. Aszkenazy also owns the San Fernando Valley Sun Newspaper and other area properties.

Residents have said Penney’s was forced to leave because Aszkenazy raised the rent on the property according to news reports.

But Aszkenazy has said “he spent \$350,000 to upgrade the building and the JC Penney company left before their lease was up,” according to news reports.

His wife Martha Diaz Aszkenazy, who co-partner of the development company, told the Daily News in 2012 after Penney’s closed that her company wants what the community wants. “We would be bad business people if we weren’t listening to the community and the market,” she told the 2012 story in the Daily News newspaper.

At past recent meetings, Aszkenazy has proposed developing a mixed-use project for the building that would include 101, new one-bedroom apartments with retail, boutique shops on the ground floor, according to a news report in the San Fernando Valley Sun Newspaper.

Ana Zapta, who works at the Pink and Blue Furniture store, which sells discount children's bedroom sets and toys, said she isn't opposed to the idea of apartment units in the area, but not at the JCPenney's building. She said parking would be a problem, and businesses would not do well.

"The one (that) probably will benefit more will be El Super (market) and us not really or anybody around here," Zapta said. "It will flip everything. I think it would be better to have it in a more open area instead of around this area but that is just my opinion."

But some business owners don't like the idea of apartments at all.

Hair stylist Maria Camacho, who owns Albero's Hair Salon, just off San Fernando Road, said she preferred another business to occupy the building such as a Ross, or Marshall's or other big-name retail shops to bring in more foot traffic. But not apartment renters, Camacho said.

But she and others believe because Aszkenazy is a powerful business and property owner in the area, he may succeed in moving forward with his plan and drive smaller businesses away.

Some business owners along the San Fernando Outlet Mall were afraid to speak, saying it was due to the politics of the J.C.Penney building.

One local business owner who did not wish to give his name, said he hears "good things and bad things about (Aszkenazy)."

Patricia Colarossi, who works at a local pawn shop called the San Fernando Loan Co Inc. said like many others in the area, she is still upset about the closure of the Penney's and the building's vacancy. She also said she still has to drive miles to shop at a department store. She now drives 7.6 miles to the Northridge Fashion Center.

"I was disappointed," Colarossi said of Penny's closure. "I used to do a lot of last minute shopping, if I needed gifts. From a business standpoint, I think it brought a lot of traffic into the city."