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Mall tenants will get time to relocate

By STEVE COLLINS , The Bristol Press

BRISTOL -- The downtown mall's three dozen tenants won't find City Hall a harsh landlord, city officials vowed Friday. But they will have to hit the road -- gently.

"Nobody is going to be rushed out of anything," Mayor Gerard Couture promised. He also said that tenants will get government help to relocate.

The mayor said it will be at least a year before the city will need the 17-acre property vacated.

Bob Cattel, who owns the Super Dollar store at the mall, said he's glad he can get another Christmas season in his current location.

"We intend to work with" all of the tenants, said attorney **Houston Putnan Lowry** of Meriden, hired by the city to assist with the real estate deal.

He said a few tenants have long-term leases, including Ocean State Job Lot, while others have month-to-month or even unwritten deals with the current owners.

In general, officials said, most of the tenants could be ordered to leave with 30 days' notice.

But, **Lowry** said, giving a business 30 days to depart is "insane" and the city has no intention of hammering anyone at the mall that way.

Cattel said that that knowing they're safe for another year "puts us at ease a little bit" at the mall.

Attorney Thomas Welsh, who works with **Lowry**, said that because the city is buying the land, it is stepping into the role of landlord. It will gain all the rights that landlords are allowed under the law, he said.

Richard Lacey, a city lawyer, said that the state Department of Economic Development had made it clear to the city that the tenants have be treated respectfully and their needs considered carefully in municipal plans.

Greater Bristol Chamber of Commerce President John Leone, a former mayor, said the city's help for tenants tossed out of the privately-owned Mamatseos building last year show City Hall's good faith.

"We want businesses downtown," Leone said.

Jonathan Rosenthal, the city's economic development director, said there are two or three leases that tenants hold that are going to require special consideration from the city. He did not elaborate.

As part of the real estate closing Monday, the city will receive a rent roll that will lay out exactly which tenants exist on the property and the terms of the agreements they have with Gatto, according to **Lowry**.

Lowry said that Gatto was wary throughout the negotiations about the city speaking directly with any tenants. He apparently worried that tenants might move out early if they felt the city would soon oust them anyway.

Lowry said that after the city takes possession of the property on Monday, it will send letters to every tenant and begin relocation talks with them.

Couture said there will be personal meetings with tenants as well.

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