

Judge Approves Sale of 22 Maryland Superfresh Stores

The closings could mean thousands of lost jobs if another supermarket chain doesn't step in and start new stores.

By [Bruce Vail](#) | April 29, 2011

The job prospects for some 1,600 Maryland grocery store workers became even more uncertain Thursday when a federal bankruptcy judge approved a plan to sell 22 Superfresh stores across the state, along with three other supermarkets in Delaware and the District of Columbia.

Last year, the chain closed many underperforming stores, [including one at Dulaney Plaza in Towson](#). That location is now being renovated by [a new tenant, The Fresh Market](#).

Superfresh currently operates two stores in and around Towson—one at the Towson Place shopping center on Goucher Boulevard, and the other on Aylesbury Road in Timonium.

Bankruptcy Judge Robert D. Drain in White Plains, NY, approved a plan by Superfresh's parent company—The Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Co, or A&P—to sell the stores to new owners either as an intact chain of 25 stores or as smaller groups and individual outlets.

It is widely believed by grocery industry experts that this sale will inevitably result in some stores being closed and employees losing their jobs permanently. A&P spokesman Eric Andrus declined to comment.

"I see it (the Maryland Superfresh chain) being taken apart and about half a dozen of the stores being closed and never reopened as supermarkets," said Robert Gorland, a senior research analyst with the consulting firm Matthew P. Casey & Associates in Harrisburg, PA.

Many of the Superfresh stores are quite valuable though, either as grocery stores or as locations for other retail outlets, Gorland added. Therefore, there is likely to be spirited competition to acquire those sites from companies such as Safeway, Harris Teeter, Whole Foods, and others, he said.

For George Murphy Jr., president of United Food & Commercial Workers Local 27, the focus now turns to helping unionized companies acquire the bulk of the Maryland Superfresh locations.

Towson-based Local 27 currently represents about 1,500 Superfresh employees affected by the store sales, he said, and the union hopes to preserve these jobs by assisting unionized companies like Giant Foods or Safeway in acquiring the Superfresh stores, he said.

In the other similar cases good wages and benefits have been preserved for workers when a store location passes from one unionized company to another, he said. For Local 27, the worst alternative is for non-union operations like Food Lion, Whole Foods or Weis Markets to buy the stores, Murphy said.

"And I haven't given up on A&P yet, either," Murphy said.

The parent company has decided to retain three stores located in the Ocean City area, he said, and the union will work to have A&P reconsider the planned sales of some of its other locations.

For veteran workers at Superfresh stores, the sale to a non-union store would be a bitter blow indeed, said Gorland.

"If someone is a 20 or 30 year A&P employee, the chances of finding a job with similar wages and benefits in today's retail environment are not good, not good at all," he said.

Wages are already low in this area, according to Maryland's Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation. Department spokesman Mike Raia said the most recent statistics indicate that the average grocery clerk in Maryland earns only \$25,532 a year. Since many grocery workers are only able to work part time, their net incomes are even lower, he said.



Another Food & Commercial Workers union leader, Wendell Young IV of Pennsylvania-based Local 1776, said he is worried about the fate of his members at the Superfresh locations in Frederick and Brunswick.

"I've met with the members there, and expectations on their part are pretty low. Workers in the retail industries have taken a terrible beating over the last 15 years or so. Wal-Mart and other low-cost operators have put tremendous pressure on wages," he said.

Young said he is working closely with Local 27's Murphy and other union leaders to protect what jobs they can. The union has formed a working group of about 15 different locals in eight states to deal with the problems created by the larger A&P bankruptcy, he said.

The labor leaders are planning to meet jointly with A&P representatives in early May to discuss labor contract concessions connected to the restructuring of the larger grocery company, which operates other brand name chains such as Pathmark and Waldbaum's, he said. A&P has already eliminated about 5,000 of its 40,000 jobs since entering bankruptcy in December of last year, Young estimated.

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