

3 charities benefit from sale

Clearance of Design Ideas merchandise was bright spot

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A three-week clearance sale of Design Ideas merchandise at the former Kmart on MacArthur Boulevard turned into six weeks, total sales of \$250,000 and more than double the \$5,000 each promised three local charities.

It also left company president Andy Van Meter pondering a space that has been vacant, other than for temporary sales, for nearly four years.

“It could be a great retail space,” said Van Meter, who also chairs the Sangamon County Board.

Van Meter selected the property at 2115 S. MacArthur as the site of his company’s annual clearance sale rather than use wholesale brokers. Sales figures from the event were released Tuesday.

The holiday sale, which began in mid-November, originally was scheduled for three weeks but was extended to Christmas because of the demand. Design Ideas sells accessories for the office and home to retail chains and specialty shops worldwide, including its signature GelGems window decorations

“It was way beyond our expectations,” Van Meter said.

He added that the company lost \$200,000 on the sale, but that the loss would have been higher had he used the traditional East Coast brokers.

He said he would consider the Kmart space again this year, if costs can be cut.

Approximately \$11,500 each was raised for the Illinois Symphony Orchestra, Big Brothers/Big Sisters of the Illinois Capital Region, and the Sparc program for children and adults with disabilities.

The event also brought attention - and unaccustomed retail traffic - to a space that has been mostly vacant since the Kmart store closed in early 2003. Green Family Stores of Springfield has converted it for a temporary auto sale this week.

Traffic, including foot traffic from nearby residential areas, was not the problem, Amy Zaffiri, a regional account manager for Design Ideas, said.

“We had a lot of support from the neighborhood. There were a lot of people who said, ‘I walked from my house,’” Zaffiri said, who helped manage the sale.

She added that customers and the merely curious tapped on the windows

days before the sale was to start. It also helped that items were marked down 75 percent for the clearance sale/fundraiser.

But use of the former Kmart space was not without its challenges, including the sheer size of approximately 106,000 square feet. The sale used only a small portion of the building.

Jim Sullivan, chief operating officer for Design Ideas, said he believes there is tremendous retail or office potential at the site, but that the size and property tax costs probably have made it difficult to sell or lease the space.

“People don’t realize the back costs that go into it,” he said, adding that there were some concerns about location.

“We had a lot of concerns about it being so far from the west side, but it turned out to be a great retail location,” he said.

Representatives of the three charities said the extra money would go to program expenses and supplies.

Denise Corcoran, director of marketing and development for Big Brothers/Big Sisters, said the program expects to serve 927 children this year compared to 850 in 2006. Even then, she said, there is a waiting list of 100 children.

Illinois Symphony Orchestra executive director Cheryl Snyder said the proceeds would help to pay for Youth Concerts and other education programs, while Sparc director of vocational services Kathie Wozniak said the money would help buy supplies for job-training programs.

“One of the best parts of this for all of us was that it helped the community realize we’re out there,” Wozniak said.

The recently formed MacArthur Boulevard Business Association has made filling the Kmart space a priority. The group’s chairman also said he believes the cost of buying and updating the space has discouraged potential tenants.

“I looked at it personally. Instead of having two stores, we’d have one big store,” said Jeff Cumming, president of Springfield Flooring Solutions at 3125 S. Douglas Ave. and Top Notch Floors, 1500 Wabash Ave.

Both stores are just off the MacArthur corridor.

Cumming said he also is concerned by the loss of two other longtime retailers along the Wabash Avenue commercial corridor - a Cohen Furniture store at 1665 Wabash and K’s Merchandise at 2001 Wabash.

“Those are some big spaces that need to be filled,” he said.

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