

Halifax's iconic Mills store closes

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One of Halifax's most famous shops has closed its doors after a nearly a century in business.



Mills Halifax has been placed into receivership and closed its doors at the end of Tuesday, says a news release issued by the company.

Peter Wedlake of Grant Thornton has been named receiver.

Wedlake and the store's owners, Lisa Gallivan and Candace Thomas, informed the 20 full-time and part-time employees of the closure at a meeting Thursday morning.

"This is a sad day for the people who work at Mills, as well as their families, the people who shop at Mills and the people who sell to Mills," Gallivan and Thomas said in the release.

The womens' fashion retailer was open on Spring Garden Road for 96 years. Gallivan and Thomas, two of four businesswomen who bought Mills in 2012 from Halifax entrepreneur Mickey MacDonald, became sole shareholders earlier this year, the release said.

By investing in Mills three years ago, the new owners said they had hoped to enable the store to succeed in a dramatically changing retail environment.

“Unfortunately, despite our best efforts, as is the case with many other traditional retailers in Canada and the United States, it became clear that we would not be able to generate enough business to continue for the long term,” they said in the release.

Wedlake will manage the company’s responsibilities to creditors, suppliers and employees, the release said.

“Mills was a beloved shopping destination and holds a special place in the hearts of many Nova Scotians — making today all the more difficult,” the owners said.

The sliding doors to the shop were pulled shut and locked Thursday although a few people could be seen talking inside.

About 10 store employees, who had just been told about the closure, sat together near a coffee shop in the mall’s basement. Some had reportedly worked at Mills for 30 years.

None were in the mood to talk.

“We’re all in shock,” one employee explained.

The store’s manager, still in the mall late Thursday morning, also declined comment except to say, “It’s sad day for Halifax.”

A few years ago, the store moved into Spring Garden Place, just a stone’s throw away from its long-time location on Spring Garden.

“A lot of people were sad to see it go from the other (spot) because it was such a classic location,” said Courtney Jones, owner of Better Than Her Boutique in Spring Garden Place.

“It is just sad to see them go from the mall ...I also feel bad for the people who came to work today and don’t have a job.”

Jones, who gets most of her customers through social media, said she doesn’t believe the closure will impact sales in her shop. However, it is the third recent retail closure in the mall, she said.

“I honestly believe that the winter did hurt a lot of downtown businesses,” she said.

Kurt Bulger, co-owner of Jennifer’s of Nova Scotia, believes it is a lot more than bad weather that is behind the closure. Big-box stores have hurt many independent retailers, he said.

“Really, this is the culmination of about 25 years of horrid planning decisions by the city, allowing unchecked, unbridled residential development outside the core.... If you allow somebody to build some place, with that comes the right to have those (retail) services, but it should never have happened this way,” Bulger said.

“Every city in the world can have a Costco or a Wal-Mart. Not every city can have a Mills Brothers and all the other independents that we used to have in this town,” he said.

Heather Brophy, co-owner of Foreign Affair, another womens’ fashion retailer located across the street from Mills, said she was shocked to hear of the closure.

“We are losing a good neighbour. It is bad for the street, really bad,” she said.

“It’s been here forever. It is an icon on the street.”

One woman, walking along Spring Garden Road, said she had fond memories of bringing her children to see the Mills Brothers shop window at Christmas-time. For many years, it was decorated with a life-like scene of Snow White and the seven dwarfs

The former Halifax resident, who did not want to be identified, also recalled how her husband, a physician, used to go to Mills on special occasions to buy her outfits.

“The ladies that we all knew would sit him down and bring him things (to choose,”) she said.

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