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Sanibel Square tenants reeling from rent increases

By **ELLA NAYOR** and **IDA VAYNBERG**, sancapnews@breezenewspapers.com

After being handed unexpected notices of increased rents and — in some cases — eviction notices, feelings of anger, shock and hurt is resonating among some of the Sanibel Square’s shop owners.

Marilyn and George Goumas, owners of Goumas Chocolates, could not believe the figure they were given by the property’s new owner, Marcel Middendorf, during a scheduled meet-and-greet event two weeks ago.

The couple, who used to pay \$2,300 in rent each month, are being told they must now pay \$7,000.

“He tripled everyone’s rent,” she said. “We’re all leaving.”

As soon as the candy makers received their notice, they proceeded to put a cardboard sign on the window saying they’re going out of business. Though the couple had pondered the idea of going back to their home state of Ohio, where they have two other chocolate businesses, the decision became accelerated and definite following the rent increase.

“It’s too hard to make a living here,” she added.

The Goumas’ also said they wondered how Middendorf thought they could sell \$7,000 worth of chocolate during the off-season months.

The couple is disheartened to have to leave a place they have called home for five years.

“I built it up,” said George Goumas. “People got to know who I was.”

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All of the chocolates, including hand-dipped and other sweets, are currently on sale. The shop owners are also selling their display cases and walk-in cooler.

“I don’t understand what the philosophy is behind this,” said Ric Base, President of the Sanibel-Captiva Chamber of Commerce, explaining that he did not know much about Middendorfs’ intentions since they are not members of the Chamber. “If everybody did that, we’d have no businesses on this island.”

A few foot steps away from Goumas Chocolates, Susan Flynn, owner C Turtles clothing boutique, is working to move all of her inventory to a new location she will be renting in the Tahitian Gardens. Flynn’s rent quadrupled, forcing her to move.

Last week, Flynn hustled around her shop and jostled clothing off of racks to move to the businesses new location.

“I feel like we have to re-invent ourselves,” she said, filling her arms with men’s polo style shirts.

Beneath the layers of clothing lies the woman, known to many for her upbeat personality and cheeriness. She said despite her dismay at the situation, Flynn said she is grateful that the Naves’ gave her a chance to work on the business.

“The Naves have been good to us for so long,” she said.

And Flynn is hopeful about the future.

“We are getting to be bigger and better,” she added.

Local children’s book author Helen Ketteman eyed the display cases at Goumas Chocolate on Tuesday morning, where everything was offered at a 20 percent discount. She the once-filled trays and selected her favorite treats — dark chocolate pecan bark and English Toffee. In all, she

picked out three boxes of the sweet confections, hopefully enough to last her a long time.

Ketteman, who adores Goumas Chocolates, said that she is saddened that they are going out of business. Even more, she is agitated by landlord’s decision to raise the local “mom and pop-like” shops’ rents.

“I think it’s terrible that they raised the rents that they have,” said Ketteman. “They’re going to kill all of the good business on the island.”

Robert Coscia, a managing licensed broker and owner of Sanibel One Source Realty — whose office shares a wall with the Sanibel Bean, also owned by Marcel Middendorf — said that they never even received a notice informing them that their rent was going up. Instead, they were served with a letter on Friday, May 30 at 10 a.m. from the Lee County Judicial Court System asking them to vacate the premises by June 30. The letter was signed by Marcel Middendorf and Pat Middendorf.



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“And he and his mother who signed this letter were the same people who told us previously, ‘Don’t worry, breathe a sigh of relief — we’re not like the others,’” Coscia said.

He pointed out that the letter was addressed as “Dear Sir or Madam” and felt that he deserved better from someone who had been his neighbor and whom he watched go from “a box boy at the Eckerd Drug store” to his landlord.

According to the Lee County Property Appraiser’s Web site, the Sanibel Square property located at 783 Dunlop Road was sold by Charles Nave for \$10,000,000 on May 15, 2008 to the West Gulf Company, LLC at 928 Deep Lagoon Lane in Fort Myers, listed to Marcel Middendorf.

Coscia said that on Friday, May 16, all of the tenants had been invited to a meeting to come and meet the new owners. He added that prior to and during the meeting, they were each reassured that “nothing was going to change.”

“I sat down for a long time with Pat Middendorf, and I spoke to her and she said, ‘No, you know things are going to stay the same. I look forward to having you as a tenant and keeping everything and having a relationship with you and your business,’” Coscia said, adding that she has seemed genuine to him. “Everyone gave speeches and said things about how, you know, it was going to be a seamless transition.”

However, he was then not invited to a meeting held by Marcel Middendorf on the following Friday (May 23) but attended it anyway when he heard about it from a fellow tenant.

According to Coscia, Middendorf handed out letters to all the tenants informing them that their rent was going to go up. When Coscia asked for his letter, he was told he was not receiving one.

“I said, ‘Well Marcel, I didn’t get one of those pieces of paper about the rent going up. Where is mine?’ He goes, ‘Well you don’t get one. You’re leaving.’”

Coscia added that Middendorf added, “‘We’re going to get somebody who has a more symbiotic relationship to the coffee house in there.’”

Sanibel One Source Realty had been at that location for two years and had been paying \$40 per square foot of retail space in rent, which totaled to approximately \$4,000 a month.

In addition, Coscia said that they have spent “tens of thousands of dollars” to completely remodel their space, and recently were allowed to add new signage to the marquee, building and awning at yet another great expense. They also have thousands invested in advertising fees both on and off the island — with some (including the new phone directory) listing their location as “next to The Sanibel Bean.”

Coscia also went to see Pat Middendorf immediately after he received his notice of eviction to see why the sudden change of heart, but was told she

was not home.

When he briefly described the situation to Middendorf's husband who greeted him at the door, he responded with, "I know absolutely nothing about anything."


He pointed to The Sanibel Bean's color advertisement on page 62 of the Sanibel-Captiva phone directory which reads, "Locally owned and operated with principles that go beyond making a buck..."

"With power and money comes responsibility and giving back to the community and others," Coscia said. "I'm not saying that you have to be a complete philanthropist or anything, but you just don't do stuff like that — you know it's easy to forget who and where you were at one time."

Reached by telephone on Monday night for comment, Marcel Middendorf refused to talk about the rent increases or allegations made by his tenants.

In addition, a message left by the Island Reporter at Pat Middendorf's home last week was not returned.



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