

Walnut Creek Jewish Community Center set to shut down Friday

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The Contra Costa Jewish Community Center in Walnut Creek is shutting down Friday and suspending its adult day care programs and preschool -- a move that has blindsided patrons of the 27-year-old center.

"I am absolutely sick," Darby Lockett said Thursday outside the center on Tice Valley Road. For two years Lockett and her husband, Dudley, have come to the center for an adult day program for people with Alzheimer's, which Dudley attends. Darby is part of a support group there once a week.

The teachers, who are losing their jobs, are wonderful, said Lockett, who doesn't know where she and her husband will go.

The JCC sent a letter Wednesday to parents of the preschool program, saying activities would be suspended starting Friday. The center, apparently having major financial difficulties, broke off from the Jewish Federation and The Jewish Community Foundation of the East Bay, based in Oakland, about a year and a half ago. The JCC becoming its own entity had nothing to do with the closure, said Rabbi James Brandt, CEO of the federation and foundation. Instead, he cited the economy and difficulties in fundraising as the reasons, adding that he was as shocked as everyone else to learn Wednesday of the closure.

"At an urgent board meeting last week it was determined that we are now at a point where the current offerings and corresponding fundraising activity cannot guarantee sufficient cash to cover the programs at the Tice Valley facility," according to the letter from Robert Rich, JCC president, who did not return calls for comment. "Given this, the only course to take was, and is, to suspend the activities of the (adult day program), the JCC preschool and all other on-site programming."

The letter also said employees at the center will be laid off and the property put up for sale.

With around 400 members and about 70 children in the preschool, the center apparently has had financial problems for the past few years. A federal tax return covering April to June 2010 shows a \$151,253 deficit just for those three months. The JCC had to begin filing its own tax records after spinning off from the federation.

Brandt said they are working to help the families displaced by the closure.

"As sad as this is, one of the things that is heartening to me is we have been working full time with preschools and synagogues in the community ... and they are really coming together to find new options for the displaced children," he said.

Parents gathered at the center Thursday said their main concern is the kids. They said they are working feverishly to plot their next move; they hope they can somehow keep the preschool program going, either at the JCC or somewhere else.

Thursday was the Hanukkah party at the school, and parent Mark Lipton wondered how you tell your child that today is the party and tomorrow is the last time they may see their friends.

"Because it's children, the number one goal is continuity," he said.

Other parents said that because it's winter break, finding a new school immediately may be impossible. The parents have set up an email address -- helpjckids@gmail.com -- for anyone who wants to donate or get information.

The shock over news of the closure was evident Thursday. Making it harder to fathom was that, for years, the organization had told its members it wanted to expand and was asking for money to fund that.

In 2008, the JCC won the right from the City Council to develop 2.6 acres next to its Tice Valley center into an 80-unit condo complex. It was a controversial approval, but JCC leaders said the development was necessary to raise money to help pay for a \$40 million expansion planned for the center. That development was never started.

Another wrinkle is that the city's Tice Valley Gym, next door to the Jewish center, was built in 1995 on JCC-owned land. In exchange, the JCC is allowed to use the gym, where it still plans to hold some of its extracurricular classes, said Barry Gordon, director of Arts, Recreation and Community Service for the city. And the city has a 99-year lease for the gym land, so even if the JCC is sold, the city gym will remain, he said.

No one associated with the JCC returned calls for comment.

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