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Community health group buys Sears building



North County Health Services has purchased the building that houses the Sears Hometown Store at 220 Rotanzi St. (Maureen Robertson)

By **Maureen Robertson**

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Twenty years ago, Amy and Jeff Ruland took a chance — and it paid off.

The Rulands, owner/operators of the Sears Hometown Store at 220 Rotanzi St. since June 1998, closed escrow on the sale of their 8,149-square-foot building to North County Health Services last Thursday. According to Sandicor Inc., the building sold for \$1.6 million.

The store remains open on Rotanzi Street and may not close there for six or more months. Then it will move to another location with a new owner.

“There will be a Sears store in Ramona,” said Jeff Ruland. “...This is a really strong market for Sears customers and Sears does not want to give up this market, so it will be in a different location.”

North County Health Services is a private, not-for-profit organization with 12 community health centers and two mobile clinics. Its Ramona center has been at 217 Earlham St. since the early 1970s. Before that, it operated out of a church basement, said Craig Jung, Ramona resident who serves on the North County Health Services Board of Directors.

“The money’s been accumulating for years for this project,” said Jung. “...Financially they’ve done sound investments so they could get the money so this could happen up here.”

Jung worked in hospital plant operations for 35 years before he retired as a hospital plant services director. He and Ruland agree that the health center’s eventual move from Earlham to Rotanzi Street is positive for the dental and outpatient services it provides, particularly to uninsured or underinsured individuals. The center charges sliding scale fees based on ability to pay.

“The Earlham building was getting old, and there were some security issues,” said Jung. “Also, it was getting too small.”

Original plans for the Arch Health Partners building at 211 13th St. included space for North County Health Services, but an anticipated grant did not come through, so Palomar Health downsized “to what you see now,” said Jung. North County Health Services then considered buying land next to Arch Health Partners but didn’t for environmental and legal issues, he added.

While “a lot of things are up in the air” regarding when Ramona Health Center will move into the Sears Hometown building, the Rulands plan to sell their business. Based on existing prospects, Ruland said a Ramonan will operate it.

Ruland will be 58 years old this year.

“When I was 37, I said, OK, if I’m going to be a Sears dealer/owner, I’m going to own the land, too, so hopefully 20 years later it will pay off. That was the plan,” he said.

It wasn’t easy, he admitted. They needed a small business loan.

“I went to the bank and said I need to borrow a million bucks,” he said.

As construction of the building progressed, \$1 million wasn’t enough. They borrowed from Jeff’s parents and from Amy’s parents. Some in town didn’t think they would succeed, but despite the sacrifices they made, they did.

“You can make it in America if you’re willing to take a risk, and if you want to make it big you have to take a big risk,” said Ruland. “It’s kind of a success story, not only my marriage with Sears, but jumping in with both feet. It was huge ... We did the right thing. We took care of business and took care of our customers.”