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## Cohen's closing downtown store

□ Company blames  
changing retail trends  
for decision to shutter  
118-year-old location

By CLARE HOWARD

of the Journal Star

**PEORIA** — After doing business in downtown Peoria for 118 years, Cohen Furniture Co. announced Tuesday it is closing its flagship store at 336

Employees were informed of the decision Tuesday morning. A final date for the closing will be set after a close-out sale.

"It did not come as a surprise to employees, but actually hearing the date was a

was the flagship store, the mother store, a true showplace

in its time," said Richard Graf, chief executive officer.

"I told our people this is not a reflection of their abilities in management and sales. It is a reflection of the times and the way people like to shop."

Graf said a once-thriving downtown retail climate was pared down to just Cohen's and Sears.

"Retail is leaving the metropolitan area. I do not see that changing," he said.

About 15 employees in the store will be affected by the

closing, but the company will try to relocate them to other outlets. About 25 employees worked in the company's corporate offices downtown. Those jobs will be transferred to the company's distribution center in Peoria Heights.

employees at eight locations.

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## STORE

While it does not release sales figures, Graf said the company has ranked among the top 100 furniture stores in the country over the last 10 years.

Three years ago Cohen's purchased Ethan Allen Interiors, 613 W. Lake Ave. The company also owns an Ethan Allen store in Bloomington.

Graf said the company board of directors has discussed the future of the downtown store for a number of years.

"This facility was an important part of a lot of people's lives. It is sad to see it go, but we must do what's in the best interest of the company," Graf said. "We did not want to abandon downtown, but we must face reality."

He is looking for another location in the metropolitan Peoria area.

Feb. 17 is the last day the store will be open for regular business. It will be closed Feb. 18 through Feb. 21 to mark down merchandise for a liquidation sale beginning at 10 a.m. Feb. 22. No final date has been set for closing. That will come in early spring, Graf said.

While a number of new furniture stores have opened in Peoria in recent years, Graf said competition had nothing to do with the decision to close the store. The decision was based on the trend of retail moving out of downtown and on downtown riverfront development.

A number of businesses have expressed interest in the building, but Graf declined to be more specific.

Jim Baldwin, chairman of

the Riverfront Business District Commission, said the Cohen building is in better repair than some structures within the riverfront district. The building could be converted for office space or for a possible alternative for the technology center currently targeted for the Bergner building.

"As more people live and work downtown, the location becomes more viable. Property owners who couldn't even unload land now see it as more valuable," Baldwin said.

"While I don't see another major retail facility at the site, I am aware that Sears is doing better business than two years ago. That may be due to the economy or to downtown events that bring people to the riverfront. Some of them stop in at Sears," he said.

Les Cohen at Cohen Development Co. said he has researched the building back to its origins in the late 1890s.

"We will work on restoring this building to its original Italianate splendor," he said.

He expects to put \$2 million in redeveloping the structure and said it could be ready for occupancy after mid-summer, with supporting parking by mid-1998.