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Retail stores looking for big finish to Christmas shopping season

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By **LOU HIRSH**
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Even as sales projections appeared to be getting worse in an already-dismal climate, Inland retailers and malls weren't going down without a fight as the holiday shopping season entered its pre-Christmas home stretch.

Stores were counting on the traditional flurry of procrastinators and others holding out for even bigger discounts than what's been seen continually over the past six weeks. Retailers such as Macy's, JC Penney, Kohl's and Ann Taylor were accommodating, offering discounts of 30 percent to 70 percent this week on clothing, housewares and electronics.

Local malls and national retailers planned to stay open well into the evening on Christmas Eve, and stores such as Toys R Us planned to keep their doors open past midnight on Friday and Saturday to nab bargain-hunters.

The activity comes as the International Council of Shopping Centers, a New York-based industry trade group, on Tuesday revised its projections for this year's national holiday sales, predicting retailers this year will finish November and December down 2 percent from last year. That's a revision from its previous prediction of a 1 percent decline, and would make 2008 the worst season for retailers in nearly 40 years.

"It's pretty dismal," said George Whalin, president of Retail Management Consultants in San Marcos. "They did OK business this past weekend, but they didn't do great business."

"You can't salvage a six-week season in a few days," he added. "The consumer right now has just stopped spending."

Still, Inland mall operators said the past few days offer signs that the season may at least finish on an upbeat note. Shoppers since the weekend have flocked to several shopping centers despite rain.

"It's already started to pick up," said Steve Naval, general manager of Promenade Shops at Dos Lagos in Corona, referring to steady crowds that continued into Monday. "Whether it will be enough for these (retailers) to meet their goals, we'll have to wait and see."

Masa Liles, marketing director at Victoria Gardens in Rancho Cucamonga, said rain late last week didn't help matters, but foot traffic recovered during the weekend. "For an outdoor center like ours, the weather is really important," she said.

Bargain hunters were out in force Tuesday at Lake Elsinore Outlets. "We had a lot of people come out yesterday, on a freezing and rainy Monday, and we're pretty busy today," said General Manager Kristin Elfring.

In the packed parking lot of Riverside Plaza Tuesday, Edie Weinfurter was pleased with the bagful of bargains she had just found at Gottschalks, with items 30 percent to 50 percent off. She was impressed with the overall pricing and offerings at several local stores this late in the season, though she'll likely buy fewer things than last year and planned to wrap up all of her holiday shopping by day's end.

"I'm heading over to See's to get some candy, and that should be it," said the Riverside resident.



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Darshan Gupta, 4, left, Darshan Gupta, 34, and Eesha Gupta, 2, right, all from San Mateo, shop at The Promenade Shops at Dos Lagos on Tuesday.