

Navy's market facing closure

Commissary has
1,500 shoppers daily

By Neil Strassman
Staff writer

LONG BEACH — Military retirees and reservists could be big losers when the Long Beach Naval Station closes this September because the commissary where they buy food is scheduled to close with the base.

The big market offers rock-bottom prices on many items, from cookies to cantaloupes, and customers pay a 5 percent surcharge on their total purchase.

Consider: A dozen eggs for 73 cents; a gallon of milk for \$1.70; a pint of Haagen-Dazs chocolate ice cream for \$2.15; \$4.49 for salmon fillets; and grapefruits for 22 cents each (37 cents less than at the local store). In the Navy, you pay only 20 cents a pound for navel oranges, less than half what the public pays.

The commissary, with its 84 civilian employees, is the anchor of the base's regional shopping center that includes the Navy exchange — a department store with everything from Waterford crystal to blue jeans and 1993 sales of \$33.2 million — and a pharmacy, dry cleaners, hair salon and even a gas station.

"For the retirees, this is their club," said Cmdr. Roger Pigeon, who heads the exchange, which is not closing.

Hank Frisch, a retired Army master sergeant from San Pedro, said, "It's one of the privileges for serving 20 years." He has shopped at the commissary since 1956 and estimates he has saved 20-30 percent on his food bill.

"My husband worked for peanuts all those years, and we con-

MONDAY

▶ March 7, 1994

Long
Beach
Press
Telegram

Page 1 of 2

CLOSE: Store near end

CONTINUED FROM A1

sider this part of his benefits," said Doris Jones of Palos Verdes.

The military market on Terminal Island tallies about 1,500 shoppers a day, and 71 percent are military retirees and their dependents or reservists.

Not counting active-duty military, reservists and disabled veterans, there are about 125,000 people — 54,000 retirees and 71,000 dependents and widows — within 60 miles of the store who are eligible to shop there.

The nearest commissaries are in El Segundo at the Los Angeles Air Force Base and at El Toro Marine Corps Air Station; but El Toro will close in a few years. The next-closest commissaries are at Camp Pendleton Marine Corps Base near Oceanside and March Air Force Base near Riverside.

The Long Beach commissary, which grossed \$24.7 million in 1993, was set to close by Aug. 1, but lobbying by naval station commanding officer Capt. John Jones won a two-month reprieve and got the Defense Commissary Agency to at least consider not closing the store.

"Whenever people meet me in the street, they want to know what will happen to the commissary," Jones said. The fate of the store, he said, is one of the most emotional issues of the base clo-



Shoppers wait in the checkout line at the commissary of the Long Beach Naval Station. The base is scheduled to close in September.

Press-Telegram photo / Juanito Holandez

sure process.

"We're now going to keep it open till the end of September," said Mark Swearingen, spokesman for the commissary agency, based at Fort Lee, Va. "Keeping it open longer than that is under consideration."

Also under study, is a Port of Long Beach proposal to demolish the naval station and build a 127-acre container terminal and railyard in its place.

The port would build support facilities — barracks, a commissary, a medical clinic, and recreational clubs — for sailors on ships repaired at the naval shipyard, which is not closing.

But it's not clear whether the new facilities would be large enough to accommodate the people now served at Long Beach.

There are good bargains at the

exchange: A tube of Crest toothpaste sells for \$2.15, but right next to it is the generic exchange brand made by Crest selling for 99 cents. Similarly for Bayer aspirin, the \$3.95 name-brand is alongside the 99-cent exchange brand.

The pharmacy is often packed, and all-day shoppers fill baskets at the exchange, unload at the car, and then head for the commissary.

If the commissary closes, Pigeon worries that sales at the exchange will drop. "I can't afford to lose the commissary," Pigeon said. "It's an integral part of why people shop here."

The exchange, he said, must earn a profit to cover operating costs. Any remaining profit becomes "sailor dollars," money for the Navy's welfare and recre-

ation fund.

"We feel we're helping by shopping here, helping the recreation of the troops and keeping it in the family," said John Pastor, 74, of Burbank, who has shopped at the Long Beach complex every two months for the past 20 years.

But the commissary, unlike the exchange, is not self-supporting, and the agency that runs it now must find funds in the ever-decreasing defense budget to keep the Long Beach store open, if it is to remain open.

A decision on the store will likely be reached within a couple of months, Swearingen said.

"Given the number of people the commissary serves, I hope it stays open," Capt. Jones said. "But I can't really say if it will. It's up in the air."

Page 2 of 2