

Nervous shoppers rear-end store shelves

BY LANE DEGREGORY AND LEONORA LAPETER ANTON

Times Staff Writers

Nathan Shirk had gone to Walmart at Bay Pines Boulevard on Sunday afternoon to shop for eggs, milk, yogurt and corned beef. The father of two didn't need any **toilet paper**, but he noticed the empty shelves.

Then he heard people running. He rounded a corner and found a pallet of **toilet paper** being unloaded from a cart, just as dozens swarmed around the chest-deep stack of Angel Soft.

He remembered his wife's cousin had posted a picture of her empty **toilet** roll holder, so he grabbed two packages for her. He put another in the cart for his in-laws and took one for his family.

A woman rolled her eyes at him, disdainful of his four rolls. She only had two. 'Apparently, that makes her a better person than me,' he said.

As he walked away from the crowd, he saw an elderly man nervously enter the fray. Someone reached in and pulled a package out for him. The entire pallet - with dozens of six-packs - disappeared in about three minutes.

'People like their comforts,' said Shirk, a Realtor. 'All of a sudden, someone is not quite prepared, and it feeds the hysteria.' As the coronavirus pandemic grows, people across the globe are stripping stores of their supplies and stockpiling. No one wants to get caught with their pants down.

In Hong Kong, thieves held up a supermarket to steal a delivery of **toilet paper**. In Australia, a newspaper printed eight blank pages 'for you to use in an emergency.' And police in Oregon issued a statement begging residents not to call 911 if they run out of **toilet paper**. 'You will survive without our assistance,' said the announcement, which urged people to try alternatives like grocery receipts, rags, even that empty roll on the holder.

'On the one hand, (the response is) understandable. But on the other hand, it's excessive,' Steven Taylor told CNN. Taylor is a professor and clinical psychologist at the University of British Columbia who wrote a book, *The Psychology of Pandemics*.

Social media, he said, is feeding the fear. As people shared images of empty aisles on Facebook and Instagram, others worried they better get their own goods while they could.

Monday, only a dozen packs of Scott **paper** towels filled the four shelves on Aisle 8. Barney Birocco, 72, stared at the empty space and shook his head.

He said he wasn't really worried. A neighbor had picked up a six-pack for him and his wife, which should last at least a month - if they ration.

And if they're stuck inside longer than that?

He plans to go primal. 'I have a real nice grove of bamboo out behind my house, and it's full of leaves, plenty to share.' Michael Paparzyriou's TLC food mart in Gulfport usually sells 70 rolls of **toilet paper** per week, but over the weekend, customers had bought them all some 10 rolls at a time.

He hadn't thought to ration it, like Walgreens and Publix. His supply company had promised to deliver more Monday. But when Paparzyriou looked into the truck, there was none.

In the 18 years he had managed the store, he had never run out of **toilet paper**. Not even before a hurricane.

'It's crazy,' he said, shaking his head. 'People are stupid.' For now, folks would have to settle for tissues, sold in those pocket-sized packs.

At Madison Avenue Pizza in Dunedin, a **toilet paper** tower was set up on Monday, next to the gumball machine.

The owner, Sean Ferraro, said he had access to large quantities, from his wholesaler, and wanted to help after hearing how desperate some folks had gotten. He added six cases with 600 rolls - to his usual order and then he encouraged people to 'just come on by and grab a roll. No purchase necessary, no judgement.' Regena and Richard Panek planned further ahead than most. They were at their computer repair shop in Apollo Beach one day last week when she saw a Facebook post about a bidet. They had enough **toilet paper** for a month, but they had begun to contemplate a future where it is limited. She'd heard of an eight-pack going for \$240 on Amazon.

Online, Richard found that all the less expensive bidets were already gone, 'so it can't be just us thinking, 'Ok, let's come up with another solution.'" He paid \$1,200 for two of them.

A friend wrote on Facebook: 'Y'all cray.'

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What started as a perceived scarcity, Taylor said, became actual scarcity.

Louie Vega stopped into the Publix in South Pasadena on Monday to buy a sub. While he was waiting for his lunch, the 62-year-old landscaper wandered over to Aisle 7.

He hadn't been to the grocery store in a week, but he'd heard the rumors. He figured he should stock up on **toilet paper**.

Even if it was only to wipe away his fears.

'I have four rolls left at home, and it's only me there, so I should be fine for a month,' he said. 'But who knows how long this will last?' As Vega turned down the aisle, he gasped.

All the shelves were empty. On both sides. The store was out of **toilet paper**, **paper** towels, napkins, even boxes of regular Kleenex.

The bottom line: If you wanted something to wipe your butt, you'd have to settle for tissues - with lotion.

'I can't believe it. Why?' Vega said. 'I understand a shortage of hand sanitizer. But it's not like **toilet paper** fights coronavirus.' Publix workers said they were hoping to restock on today. But there was no guarantee. Company spokeswoman Maria Brous wrote in an email, 'We continue to receive and ship **toilet paper**.' At the Walgreens near Stetson Law School on

The aisle of paper goods, including paper towels and toilet paper, was cleared out Sunday at the Northeast Shopping Center Publix.

JAMES BORCHUCK | Times

The signs are everywhere: Shoppers are emptying store shelves of paper towels and toilet paper as soon as they're stocked.

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