

WARRENTON'S BIG-BOX PLANS PUT PRESSURE ON ASTORIA'S BUSINESSES

THE COAST Warrenton and Astoria are joined at the hip, whether they like it or not. As fishing and logging faded, the towns turned to different development paths. Warrenton courts big-box stores, while Astoria fosters small businesses and Portlanesque boutiques. Two new commercial developments in Warrenton have created uncertainty about what new companies and big-box stores will move in and what effect they'll have on small businesses in the region.

Driving north through the area illustrates the town's differences perfectly: As the highway passes through Warrenton, familiar labels like Home Depot and Ross beckon. Once it passes over the Youngs Bay Bridge and into Astoria, it twists into a traditional main street lined with stores like Danish Maid Bakery and Thiel's Music Center.

Though the recession has slowed corporate interest in expanding into the region, the North Coast Business Park and a commercial development by the Nygaard Logging Co. are still moving forward. Developers are discussing with companies, but besides an expansion plan by Costco, no one has yet committed and rumors circulate over who will be the next big-box store to move in.

"In a perfect world we'd be relying on home-grown businesses where the money circulates and stays locally," says Paul Benoit, Astoria city manager. "Especially given the recession, I would not support bringing more box stores in — it would hurt the region more than help it and put a dent in the bottom line of businesses that are already vulnerable."

"We've definitely been affected by Home Depot," says Randy Stemper, owner of Astoria Builders Supply. "By nature, big-box stores don't contribute a lot to the community."

The Coast is no perfect world, and further development is the future of working-class Warrenton, even if Warrenton City Manager Robert Maxfield is ambivalent about the impact of box stores on small businesses and the unemployment rate.

"I'm looking forward to seeing some businesses that carry things people look for," says Maxfield. "We're not going to drive to Portland or Longview to enjoy the businesses folks in those areas take for granted. I

think it's a positive thing; however, it needs to be managed in an effective way. That's life — businesses have to change and grow. I'm not saying if that's good or bad."

One certainty is that local businesses will need to find new ways to survive in an unpredictable climate of competition.

JENNY FURNISS

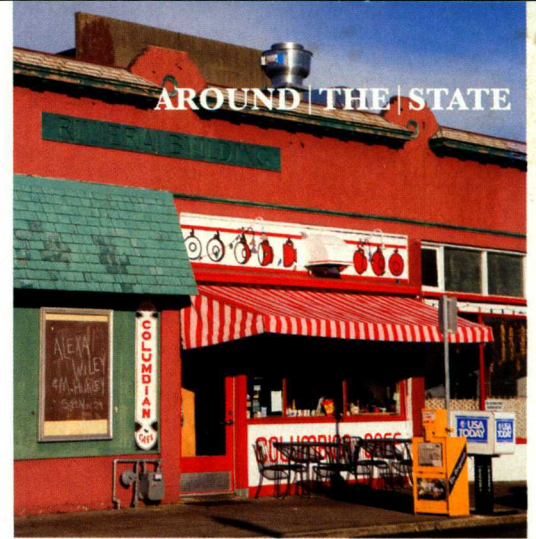


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