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JOHN DODGE

Wildwood is the poster child for neighborhood centers

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Staff writer October 29, 2014

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Andrea Rigg and her daughter, Clara, 2, greet friend Alexis Erickson at Spud's Produce Market in the Wildwood Building on Capitol Way in Olympia.

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The Olympia Planning Commission wants to hear from the public about things the city can do to encourage neighborhood centers such as the one found in the Wildwood Building on Capitol Way. The commission has scheduled a public hearing on this topic 6:30 p.m., Nov. 17, at Olympia City Hall, 601 Fourth Ave. E., Olympia.

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In a span of two years, an historic, but dormant, shopping center on Olympia's Capitol Way has morphed into a hub of four businesses embraced by neighborhood residents and city officials.

Welcome to the Wildwood Building, which was designed in the Art Moderne style by noted Olympia architect Joseph Wohleb and opened in 1938 as the G.C. Valley Shopping Center, the first of its kind in Olympia, featuring a grocery store, pharmacy, and flower shop to meet the needs of the newly platted Wildwood subdivision.

Some 75 years later, the building's tenants are once again serving the needs of a pedestrian-friendly, urban neighborhood with a complementary mix of retail services befitting a buy local, sustainable lifestyle.

It's not out of the question that someone could start the morning with a cup of fresh-brewed coffee at Olympia Coffee Roasting Co., then shop at Spud's Produce Market to prepare home-cooked meals, grab an artisan sandwich or salad for lunch from The Lucky Lunchbox and return that night with the family for dinner at Vic's Pizzeria.

"I can hardly imagine a better combination of businesses," Wildwood neighborhood resident Charles Bert said. "The Wildwood Building has suddenly become this hub of the neighborhood. It's energized our neighborhood a lot."

After years underutilized as a home to specialty shops and state government offices, the Wildwood Building at 2822 Capitol Way SE entered its new, wildly popular era on Aug. 8, 2012. That's the day Dave and Karissa Jekel opened Spud's Produce Market in the south side of the building.

Dave Jekel grew up in the grocery business in Tenino. He and his wife started looking for space in 2011 for a neighborhood-style grocery store to sell fresh, organic produce grown locally.

"This was one of the buildings we targeted," Jekel, 41, said. "When I saw the 'For Lease' sign go up in 2012, we jumped on it." The Jekels had a 3,100-square-foot store to fulfill their new business model dream.

"We've been real happy here and the store just keeps evolving," he said. Customers ask them to stock things, then they actually put their money where their mouth is and buy them. The latest craze? Butter from grass fed cows.

Jekel estimates that more than 60 percent of the store's customers live in nearby neighborhoods. But customers come from far and wide, including Tenino residents Kerri Turner and Joy Lower, who said she was drawn to the store by the fresh apples at 99 cents a pound.

Jekel said the four businesses have a special synergy not often found in a shopping center.

"It's nice because none of us do the same thing," he said. "And we all have things that people want."

The next business to join the Wildwood fold was Olympia Coffee Roasting Co. Oliver Stormshak, who's lived in the Wildwood neighborhood for 13 years, opened the coffee shop in March of 2013.

"I started talking to the landlord five years ago," Stormshak recalled. "The Wildwood Building is one of Olympia's gems. It has such a presence."

In December of 2013, Vic's Pizzeria owner Rachel Lee took the plunge and opened a second store to complement the original west Olympia store. "It's been fabulous," she said of the Wildwood neighborhood center. "It reminds me of something you see in Portland, Ore."

The final piece in the puzzle fell into place earlier this year when Swing Wine Bar owners Nicole and Jim Butigan sublet space from Stormshak for The Lucky Lunchbox, a gourmet sandwich shop featuring all-natural and organic ingredients.

The city's 20-year comprehensive land use plan calls for more neighborhood centers, clusters of businesses within a 20 minute or one-half-mile walk of someone's home. An on-line survey on the city's website is asking what city residents want in a neighborhood center. More than 625 responses – several times more than other on-line city surveys have received – show strong support for a grocery store, a pub or restaurant, mobile food cart, drug store and health and fitness center, to name a few.

The Olympia Planning Commission has scheduled a public hearing 6:30 p.m., Nov. 17 at City Hall to keep the neighborhood center conversation going.

The planning commission wants to make sure city regulations encourage, not discourage, neighborhood centers, said planning commission chair Max Brown, who happens to be a big fan of the Wildwood neighborhood center.

"It's in a walkable neighborhood, on the transit line and features all locally owned, customer-focused businesses – I love it," Brown said.

Retired state employee Bill Perry grew up in the neighborhood, and remembers going to the grocery store and butcher shop, and later an ice cream store when he was a kid. Now he's back living in the neighborhood and frequently stops in Spud's for groceries. "It's a big positive," he said of the Wildwood resurgence.

Spud's Produce Market brings back fond memories for Olympia Realtor Larry Peterson, whose father, Irv Peterson, opened the a grocery store in the Wildwood Building in 1940. The family business moved to west Olympia in 1962 and the original grocery store was leased out until 1965.

"It's a great neighborhood and a great little grocery store," Peterson said after roaming the aisles he frequented as a youth.

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