

The Independence City

# INDEPENDENT

## Capturing Customers: Downtown Does It Differently

By Anne Scheck

This Fourth of July the *Ovenbird Bakery* had a lot more to celebrate than Independence Day. Amid fireworks and a parade, the downtown bakery in Independence – a magnet for locals and tourists alike – passed a critical milestone. “It’s our six-year anniversary,” announced Katie Schaub, proprietor of the bake shop that launched a city-wide addiction to lemon cookies.

But it isn’t simply that the *Ovenbird Bakery* now is well past the five-year *make-it-or-break-it* period that’s seen as crucial for small businesses. It also marks a merchant victory for the City of Independence. About a decade ago, the city commissioned a “retail business development action plan” – and a bakery on Main Street topped the list of desired shops.

At the *Ovenbird Bakery*, for example, Ms. Schaub and her staff accept new recipes and whip them up on request for parties and events. As a result, Ms. Schaub has now re-created on demand a popular tomato casserole, a state fair-winning dessert and a shepherd’s pie with local

produce instead of the traditional green peas.

How do results of that city-initiated plan of several years ago compare with Main Street today?

Business owners like Ms. Schaub weighed in on how they’ve fared since the officially titled “The Independence 2020 Vision Plan” was written. At that time, “leakage” was one of the prominent findings, a word reflecting that too many people take their money outside of town to spend it.

The “Vision Plan” listed the need for a commercial district that would make Independence a consumer destination for both residents and visitors. This past month, most store owners expressed hope that the riverfront development *Independence Landing*, or more specifically the hotel and apartments slated for it, will be the ticket to a bustling future. For now, “leakage” seems to remain a fact of life.

“We’ve been waiting for this amazing boom,” said Steve Carter, who owns *Second Chance Books*, a place where it’s possible to purchase a textbook published nearly 100 years

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ago (on botany) right along with a childhood favorite (by Dr. Seuss). In fact, this bookstore graces the cover of the city's "Vision Plan" – the photo was taken just a couple years after *Second Chance Books* opened its doors. "We were hanging on by a thread," Mr. Carter recalled of those early days.

The internet provided the lifeline. Savvy online marketing and the growth of repetitive foot traffic – "return customers" as Mr. Carter terms them – assured the long-term health of the business.

Mr. Carter is optimistic that there's a pretty big boost ahead. The boarded-up building across the street, still known as "Taylor's Drug Store," is being completely refurbished and construction of a new micro-brewery and tavern down the block will be underway soon, he said.

But renovation has meant higher real estate costs for business, said Ron Smith, a food server at *The Golden Horse* and an often outspoken critic of the city. Back when his picture appeared in the "Vision Plan" – wearing his trademark black apron – costs were running a dollar per square foot. That "has turned into \$2.50," he said. The result: Scores of businesses move in, then move out, leaving empty storefronts as evidence of this churn.

However, an increase of jobs in Salem could mean potentially significant migration to less-populated neighboring cities, like Independence, where housing prices generally are lower, said Joshua Lehner, a state economist. To prospective home

buyers, small communities like Independence may be an alluring alternative to Oregon's capital. "Some want that small-town feel," Mr. Lehner explained.

At the *Arena Sports Bar & Grill*, Natalie Schafer, a transplanted Southern Californian who works there, said that "small-town feel" is the quality she finds most attractive about Independence. "There's a slower pace and friendly people here," she said. However, just as Mr. Lehner noted, one of the most appealing factors is the proximity to Salem and Corvallis.

"All it takes is a half hour to get there," she said. That proximity to the two other cities has a down side, said Ann Durley, a partner of *The River Gallery*. Downtown Independence isn't a place for shopping, she said.

"If you are coming down here to get your clock fixed, to take your dog to the vet, to get a meal or have your hair cut, it's fine," she said. But Main Street is a "service area" not a "retail center," she stressed, adding that it may become even more of a bedroom community for Salem, "where the working, shopping, recreating and shopping" take place despite the fact that the family house is here.

Though lifestyle preference and less-costly property may be driving forces for some, it's been notoriously difficult to predict the "breaking point" where longer commute times begin to outweigh a desired quality of life, Mr. Lehner said. In fact, cities continue to be a draw -- currently more people

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move from Salem to Portland than the other way around.

Retail development marketing efforts should focus on one-of-a-kind businesses that cater to a variety of income levels, according to the "Vision Plan." That means special efforts aimed at preserving and promoting the historic hometown atmosphere.

However, Independence already has become a dining destination for residents of West Salem, South Salem, Corvallis and McMinnville, said Gregory Peterson, owner of *The Independence Bar & Grill*, which this spring won a first-place award from the *Statesman Journal* for "Best of the Mid-Valley Restaurants." Mr. Peterson, a restaurateur for 16 years, moved from Salem three years ago to take over the establishment, which boasts the best plate of classic mac-and-cheese in three counties. "We make nearly everything from scratch," Mr. Peterson explained, including the burger buns.

Fresh is not hard to come by in Independence. Five years ago, vendors at *The Riverview Farmers Market* set up their wares in front of the Independence Amphitheater, with Sue Barker at the helm. Though this outdoor market is an off-shoot from the original one – still operating down the street in the Umpqua Bank parking lot – the rift that set the division between the two in motion is now considered so far in the past no one even mentions the split much anymore. "There wasn't enough room is how I explain it now," said Ms. Barker.

The markets each have a massage

station, making Independence reportedly the only city in the state to have two masseuses available at an outdoor market venue. Residents on sunny Saturdays often patronize both. "If someone comes looking for watermelons, and we don't have them here, I just say 'Go see the berry guy down there,'" explained Ms. Barker.

The trip means customers pass by downtown shops going from one to the other. And, at the other site – *The Independence Farmers Market* -- Manager Martha Walton says the growers and sellers there are the "closest thing to family members" outside of real kin.

"It looks like we come here not just to work but to enjoy ourselves, doesn't it?" asked Ms. Walton, noting that fun and familiarity was in the air right along with the scent of fresh produce and cut flowers. In the tented booths of plants and vegetables, everyone seems to know each other. One man confidently announced to a cluster of people that the warm weather is a sure sign of melon success. They still "haven't come in" but they'll be terrific when they do, he predicted.

It's this community spirit and patronage – not her luscious lemon cookies – that supply the biggest contribution to success at *The Ovenbird Bakery*, according to Ms. Schaub. More than two years ago, when pipes froze in a winter cold snap, the damage put her temporarily out of business. To make up for lost revenue, a crowd turned up with plentiful orders as soon as she was able to reopen. "It was such a good Christmas present," she said. "A reaffirming gift of community support."



## **The CIVICS LESSON**


### ***Buffer Zones: When City and County Codes Collide***

Buffer zones, which create a neutral space between buildings or properties, have become an important part of the land-use toolkit for local governments, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's list of sustainable development practices. But, quite literally, they only go so far, as Independence City Councilor Michael Hicks learned when he asked about two areas of the city where municipal land appears to become county turf. A corner of a buffer area around Ash Creek Elementary lies outside city limits and so does part of the park buffer on North Riverside Park. Since the city cannot enforce buffers that are outside municipal jurisdiction, "I wanted to get it on the record just in case – on the off chance something is built in those areas," he said. "That way people will know that it is beyond the city's jurisdiction and not something that was built in violation of our ordinances." City Attorney Carrie Connelly called the inquiry a smart question.



## **The INDY HOP**

### ***Throwing Rocks: A Riverside Sport That Takes Scientific Skill***

Summer fun is only a stone's throw away. Just ask Gail Oberst, ace rock skipper. She has been expertly skimming pieces of rock across the Willamette River since she was knee-high to a limestone outcropping. French scientists have studied the techniques for making such tossed matter glide across water and Ms. Oberst, a longtime resident of Independence, appears to have mastered them. Size, weight and shape of the stone can make a difference – a finding on which both the scientific team and Ms. Oberst concur. Another shared observation is that flatness and smoothness are important, too. How did Ms. Oberst get so good? "I grew up with three brothers. We were always competing," she explained. "Now I compete with my son when we're anywhere near the water, and my husband." Rocks should be "smaller than a hand," she advised. And many meet that criteria at Riverview Park, she noted. Usually they come in groups, with many "good ones" in one spot, she said. Another tip: "You have to get close to the water and throw it at a very close angle," Ms. Oberst said. Then, "you have to get just the right angle to make it 'bounce,'" she added. This is achieved by a special "flick of the wrist." Also, to get really good at stone-skipping, engage in a time-honored cliché. "Practice, practice, practice," she stressed. What is it that keeps Ms. Oberst "practicing" after all these years? "It's the most fun sport ever," she said.  --AS