

Walmart: 'It takes a village to open a Walmart, to raise a Walmart'



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

People line up for the grand opening of the new Walmart store in Warrenton.

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Before customers could start to shop, the store held a ceremony that included music from the Warrenton High School marching band, a ribbon-cutting and speeches from Balensifer and state Sen. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose.

Walmart General Manager Kimberly Smith said the store had hired 250 employees, 98 percent of which are from the local community. She gave away \$23,000 to community groups, including the Astoria Parks, Recreation and Community Foundation, Clatsop County's Healthy Kids program and the local police and fire station.

"It takes a village to open a Walmart, to raise a Walmart," Smith said. "Welcome to the Walmart family."

Construction began last September after years of planning. Smith and Chris Emmons, the Walmart support manager, said people have been approaching them for months to ask when the new store would open.

"I can hardly shop for myself at other stores," Smith said. "When are you open, when are you open?" It's been all about inviting everybody and obviously the word got out. There was a lot more people here than I anticipated."

For Emmons, the opening is a chance to move back home. The Oregon native started working for Walmart 22 years ago in Newport. He moved for Walmart job opportunities eight times — from Oregon to Idaho, Montana and South Dakota.

The Warrenton store means Emmons can move back to the coast from North Dakota and settle down for good.

"Other cities aren't as friendly (as Warrenton)," Emmons said. "I love the coast. I'm looking forward to the craziness of the tourist season. I'm glad to be back."

Ann Thomson, a Seaside resident and one of the store's first customers, sees Walmart as a positive change.

"I think it's good competition for the area," she said.

Vacancies: In 2017, 50 percent of job vacancies required previous experience

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feel comfortable. Sure, we are one of the most wonderful places, but without a place to stay, workers will move on."

In Seaside, Owen has seen more and more business reduce operating hours or days in response to not enough staff to cover shifts. While the effects are largely seen in small mom-and-pop shops, the phenomenon has even closed national chains like Taco Time down to only five days a week.

"It has made business decisions for business owners," he said.

At Pelican Brewing in Cannon Beach, lack of affordable housing has led CEO Jim Prinzing to invest more in local real estate to house his workers. Pelican Brewing operates seven apartment units on site and a house in Manzanita for its employees. Even with housing, the brewery operates at 10 to 15 percent below capacity at peak season, Prinzing said.

"There are people who want to come and work for us who just have no place to

live," Prinzing said. "We'd continue to offer benefits to full-time employees and competitive wages to make the job worth their while. But I don't think we'd be paying for housing."

'The right person'

Another struggle is finding qualified employees. In 2017, 50 percent of job vacancies required previous experience. In a county with only 742 people listed as unemployed, finding talent in a small pool can be tough.

"Most who want to be working are working," Sykes said.

Lisa Kinsley, the general manager in human resources at McMenamins, experienced this firsthand when the company sought to fill eight new housekeeping positions for an expansion project in Gearhart.

They managed to do it, but only through intense networking and by raising pay a few dollars an hour.

"The Oregon Coast has a lot of hotels, so there's a lot of competition for housekeeping staff," Kinsley said.



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A line of people wait to place an order at Tsunami Sandwich Co. in Seaside.

The hotel and restaurant chain has struggled the most with finding qualified kitchen staff — jobs the state has identified as some of the toughest to fill. McMenamins has 20 vacancies, mostly related to kitchen operations, before being at capacity for a typical summer rush.

With lack of affordable housing keeping new talent away, that leaves many in the hospitality industry to compete for a limited pool of experienced staff already on the North Coast, Kinsley said.

That's part of the reason David Posalski, the owner

of Tsunami Sandwich Co. in Seaside, turned to employing foreign exchange students on work-study visas six years ago. Another issue is that fewer local high school students are seeking summer jobs, and those who do want to work fewer hours.

Posalski tried offering flexible schedules and end-of-summer bonuses to keep local kids on, but ultimately would find many weren't willing to work the number of hours he needed to operate, he said.

Students on the work-study visas, however, are here to work, Posalski said.

"When you interview them, the first question they ask is 'How many hours can I work?'" he said. "These kids, from Bulgaria and Lithuania, they want to work 60 to 70 hours a week. Because here, you can work for a summer and make a year's worth of income back home."

Impacts

When the summer crowds hit, local businesses say they will be ready to serve — with or without vacancies.

But readiness will come at a cost. If 20 positions at McMenamins aren't filled, the company will have to continue paying for wages, travel and hotel expenses for staff they bring in from Portland to fill shifts.

At Pelican Brewing, running without a full staff means sometimes closing off certain sections of the restaurant or slower food times — realities that ultimately impact profitability, Prinzing said.

"You get creative. You make it work," he said. "You get to the point where you can make it through the day, but you can't do those extra things."

For now, businesses are making it work. But if problems persist, there could be a breaking point.

"We are fortunate enough to have three locations. We're diversified. If we were one standalone restaurant it would be exceptionally challenging to handle housing," Prinzing said. "It makes you think seriously about whether it's worth expanding on the coast. That's probably the most significant impact of all this."

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