

Marketplace at former J.C. Penney still forming

Developers waiting on designers, permits

By EDWARD STRATTON
The Daily Astorian

The backers of the Astoria Oregon Marketplace, a proposed food court and tap house inside the former J.C. Penney store downtown, originally wanted to open last month. But aside from some demolition, the space has remained mostly empty.

The developers behind the project say they have been set back by a shortage of designers and a changeover in city staff.

“Right now, I’m just waiting on the designers and getting permits,” said Sean Fitzpatrick, owner of the Illahee Apartments and the marketplace.

The city recently changed building inspectors after a retirement. Tony Clifton, the new official, said he walked through the space late last month and is waiting on plans from Fitzpatrick’s architect.

Fitzpatrick is partnering with Chris Holen, a local chef and co-owner of Baked Alaska. Holen is in charge of building out a tap house with 50 beers, wines and ciders he and wife, Jennifer, recently registered with the state as Pouriin.

Holen is also in charge of recruiting food vendors. Two have mostly committed to moving in, including an Asian noodle house and a Thai or Cuban fusion restaurant, he said.

“They’re quite committed, but we’ve yet to sign a lease,” he said.

The partners have largely held back on building out the space until designers provide the final plans and they hear back on the new building official’s interpretation of city codes. The tap house build-out is largely on hold until the marketplace can prove to the state it has adequate food service on site, but the process of permitting the tap house should only take about eight weeks, Holen said.

“I think our biggest issue that came up was just making sure the building is going to be sprinklered,” Clifton said of the four or so hood vents the marketplace will install.

The building also needs to go through a change of occupancy from mercantile to an assembly space, Clifton said. The partners are not making any alterations to the historic building and will thus be able to avoid adding an elevator, he said.

The delays are simply a matter of his designers getting busy after the marketplace was first announced, Fitzpatrick said. He would not hazard a guess as to a new timeline for when the marketplace might open.



Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

From left, Chris Holen, Sean Fitzpatrick and Shannon Fitzpatrick discussed renovations to the former J.C. Penney store in downtown Astoria last June.



Photos by Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

Dallas Matuszek fills an order for a customer at Sweet Relief in Astoria.

Pot dispensaries find strength in numbers

Area retailers consolidate as a new industry evolves

By EDWARD STRATTON
The Daily Astorian

Signs for Mr. Nice Guy, an ode to the 1998 stoner comedy “Half Baked,” recently began popping up in Astoria.

The marijuana retailer has merged with a sister company, Hi Cascade, absorbing its location at the foot of the South Slope. Mr. Nice Guy will open another store next month on Bond Street downtown.

The new addition to Astoria’s growing number of marijuana stores is also part of a trend toward consolidation, as many shops try to weather a weak market, sometimes taking on outside investment capital.

Will Wiedenmann, an assistant director of operations with Mr. Nice Guy, said the two companies’ ownership felt they needed to make a universal brand behind Mr. Nice Guy. The company now has 16 locations in Oregon, including former Hi Cascades.

“Strength in numbers is a big thing,” Wiedenmann said.

Five Zero Trees, a Portland-based retailer that recently opened stores in Cannon Beach and Astoria, has six locations on the North Coast and around Portland. Sweet Relief has five locations on the North Coast and inland to Columbia County. Cannabis Nation, with a location in Seaside, has four stores around the state.

Marijuana stores have faced increas-



The exterior of the Mr. Nice Guy marijuana shop in Astoria features an elaborate mural.

ingly tight margins since overproduction after the drug was legalized in Oregon led to a sharp decline in prices. Having more places to sell allows retail chains to buy at a larger scale for a lower price, said Beau Whitney, a cannabis economist with New Frontier Data.

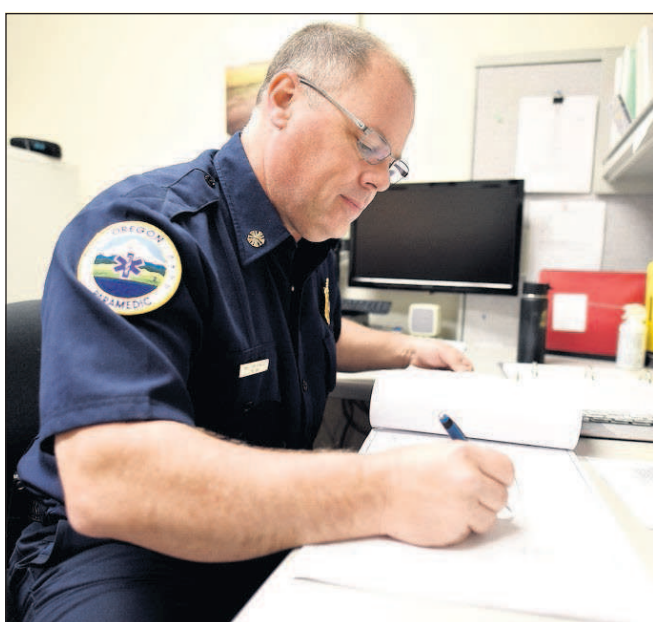
“That creates a pricing differential relative to the smaller mom and pops that don’t have the purchasing power,” he said. “To me, this is a natural evolution of the market. It’s starting to increase now lately.”

It seemed like Oregon was reaching saturation when it recorded nearly 600 dispensaries, Whitney said. But the state had focused on getting more licensees and offering lower entry fees to help take consumers away from the illicit market.

“In retrospect, when you think about it, having unlimited licenses in a closed environment ... at some point there was naturally going to be a consolidation in the marketplace,” Whitney said.

State regulators in June placed a moratorium on new licensees until they can work through the backlog of applicants seeking entry into the marijuana industry. That backlog is exacerbated by companies changing ownership as they take on investors, Whitney said. The process was made easier by the state Legislature in 2016 rolling back requirements that more than half of a marijuana store be owned by an Oregon resident.

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Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

Cannon Beach Fire Chief Matt Benedict opposes restrictions on when firefighters can be sent to help fight regional fires.

Cannon Beach policy limits firefighters on outside calls

Fire chief opposes change

By BRENNNA VISSER
The Daily Astorian

CANNON BEACH — As Clatsop County firefighters help battle the deadly Camp Fire in Northern California, the Cannon Beach Rural Fire Protection District narrowly passed a new policy on Monday limiting how often firefighters can be sent to fight fires in other places.

In a 3-2 vote, the fire district’s board decided that from June through October, the fire chief or other firefighters will only be able to be out on other calls 15 days out of any 30-day period, and can only be deployed within Oregon.

Reshaping the mobilization policy was born out of concern some board members had about the amount of time Fire Chief Matt Benedict spent helping fight fires around the state and California last summer — the season, some board members argue, where the fire

district needs a fire chief most. Summer is typically when the fire district sees a higher emergency call volume and faces more fire danger.

The change comes after two unusually active fire seasons, prompting a record number of county firefighters to be mobilized around the state and California.

With experts predicting that longer and drier fire seasons could be the new normal for the West, some on the fire

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