

# Bypass work affects Fort Hill businesses

*New highway design cited as reason for decrease in customers patronizing longtime local businesses*

By Ron Karten

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The Salmon River Highway, also known as Oregon Highway 18, became a safer roadway on May 18 with the elimination of a dangerous intersection at Fort Hill and South Yamhill River roads.

But in doing so, it also bypassed three longtime Fort Hill businesses that are now reporting declines in business from travelers going to and from the Oregon Coast.

The Fort Hill Family Dining restaurant and the Fort Hill Lounge, housed in one building, and Fort Hill Gas, the gas station and convenience store, are at the side of the highway's westbound lane. However, to get to them now is almost a two-mile detour instead of a sometimes dangerous turn off the highway.

Traveling east toward Portland and Salem, the detour starts a mile after passing businesses; traveling west toward the Oregon Coast, the detour starts a mile before.

New blue signs along the highway alert travelers of the businesses' existence.

Tribal members and leaders have supported the businesses for countless years, and the business owners have come to count on Tribal member business during traditionally slower winter months.

But last winter, snow and ice storms made a bad season worse, and now, with the Fort Hill businesses lacking direct highway access, the summer rush that all count on to fill in for the slow times has disappeared.

Business is down at the restaurant by a third and at the gas station and convenience store by 80 percent.

The lounge is doing the best, owner Mike Souza of Silverton said. He is landlord for the other two businesses, owning about eight acres at the site.

The lounge's relative success, Souza said, comes because 70 percent of lounge customers are from the community while 30 percent represent passing highway traffic; the reverse, more or less, of the customer base is true for the two other businesses.

Business has declined so much at the restaurant, eight of 11 employees have been laid off. This is the first time that Ben and Terry Goforth, who have owned the restaurant since 1981, have laid anyone off.

"We bring them back in maybe once a week," Ben said. "We're doing the best we can to bring them back."

Mostly, he said, family is left pitching in.

"It's been a shock to us," Ben said, "but we're adjusting."

Next door at Fort Hill Gas, four-year owner Rick Ven said he has laid off "four to five people. I used to have two a shift, now I'm down to one. I hated to do it, but I don't know how much longer I can hold up. Sometimes, I'm exhausted after sleepless nights trying to come up with ideas to keep the business afloat."

His orders to suppliers have shrunk from \$1,000 a week in normal summers to maybe \$300 this summer, he said. "On a day like this, the cars used to be coming and going constantly," he said.

Traffic behind the barrier has slowed to a trickle.

"I don't know how they keep going

as it is," said Fort Hill Gas clerk Donovan Jones.

## Interchange constructed

The \$14 million, two-year Oregon Department of Transportation project addressed the dangerous intersection of Fort Hill Road and South Yamhill Road, where vehicles would make turns and sometimes surprise other drivers going 45 mph.

The project widened the existing three-lane highway to include four travel lanes with a concrete barrier in the median; constructed an overpass and frontage road behind the Fort Hill restaurant and service station that connects to the interchange; constructed a new interchange almost a mile east of Fort Hill Road to replace the Fort Hill Road/South Yamhill River Road intersection, which no longer exists; closed or relocated driveways to reduce the number of direct accesses to the highway and improve safety; and added acceleration lanes.

"You can count on one hand the number of cars that go over that bridge," Ven said. "It's \$20 million for a bridge to a ghost town."

The project will be completed this fall.

Meanwhile, Souza, Ven and the Goforths have attended meetings and presented petitions signed by hundreds of customers asking the Oregon Department of Transportation to open westbound access off Highway 18 to the businesses.

"We didn't anticipate it," Terry said, "because we thought they were going to give us 'right in' (access from the highway)."

Though the "right in" concept was part of an early draft of the project that has been ongoing for more than 10 years, Transportation spokesman Adam Torgerson said the "right-in" idea was taken out of the project before 2004.

And, Torgerson said, "It would be very unusual to change project design on something like access at this point."

"What I don't understand," Ven said, "is if you can build a 'right in' where the weigh station is (heading eastbound), why you can't do that here?"

The public process has long since passed, Torgerson said.

"(The request) circumvents the public process that occurred five years ago," Torgerson said. "It would be immensely difficult to do any project if after all the public decisions are made, people came back to make more changes."

And, in fact, he said, "Lots of businesses survive with a frontage road."

In this case, a business several miles west of the new bypass is doing most of the surviving. Just off the eastbound lane and west of Spirit Mountain Casino, Seaway gas station and convenience store is experiencing an increase in sales of deli food, owner Yong Ahn said.

"A little bit in the deli," she said. "Better in gas."

Even workers from Fort Hill seem to know which way the winds are blowing.

"Someone came down from Fort Hill," said Seaway clerk Teighlor Holman. "He was laid off there and



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

looking for a job."

At the time, Tribal member Jeremiah Mercier was shopping at Seaway.

"It's way too inconvenient," Mercier said about the detour to Fort Hill Gas. "It would have been OK if they would have left one barrier out so you could go in going west. That would have been the best."

## Safety controls important

"You can't have frontage where people can pull in or out without safety controls," Torgerson said. "It's just not safe. The real issue is that that's a pretty high crash area. One of the ways you make the road safer is by making sure people don't pull in and out before an intersection."

"We share the ODOT mission statement," Terry Goforth said. "We're all about safety."

She has a lot more time on her hands these days to look out the windows. Though it is still too early for statistical traffic comparisons, she knows what she sees in the wake of the bypass.

"What we're witnessing is the big FSA (Food Services of America) trucks and the big tankers missing the exit and having to turn around between the Fort Hill and Valley Junction bridges," Terry says.

She told the story of an elderly couple traveling east. They stopped their car at the black and yellow warning sign where the road divides in front of Fort Hill restaurant.

"The cars were whizzing by, east and west," Terry said, "and she puts it in reverse and backs up into the eastbound lane. Then, she puts it in drive, and makes a U-turn to go west and come in here."

"About 10 minutes later they showed up," Terry said. "I said, 'What in the world is going on?'"

"She said, 'Oh, it's OK. There wasn't any traffic.'"

Terry told about bicyclists lifting their bikes over the concrete divider. "One hit a bump and fell in the road."

She added, "Even the Yamhill County bus pulled over to the barrier (in front of the Fort Hill businesses) and dropped two people out. They crossed the median and the road. The bus used to pull into our parking lot to let them out."

In fact, the Yamhill County bus service has been making 16 stops a day at the side of the road in front of the Fort Hill businesses, eight going west and eight going east.

**Direct access to the Fort Hill Family Dining restaurant, Fort Hill Lounge and Fort Hill Gas from State Highway 18 was cut off in May due to completion of the new interchange, overpass and frontage road. A concrete barrier is now where direct access to and from the highway used to be located.**

"I'm looking for a better way," said Pieter Schoonveld, Transit coordinator for Yamhill Community Action Partnership, which contracts with the county to run the busses. "It's not all that safe, but we can't add another 10 minutes to the route (by taking the new exit to the Fort Hill businesses) each time it passes by. That would screw up the schedule for the whole day. And we can't skip the stop because it's kind of a central point in the area."

Neither Souza, Ven nor the Goforths are going down without a fight.

Souza is upgrading the site, even turning it into a small "destination" to lure customers back.

He has poured \$50,000 into the work. A few acres were graded recently to make way for a "Park and Sell" car lot. The restaurant and lounge parking lot has been expanded and covered with gravel to allow truckers easy access.

"I'm trying to show the public that I'm investing in the community. We're one of the last small businesses in the area," Souza said.

Thirty employees with families count on the businesses for their livelihood, he added.

"We've been through a lot over the years," Ben Goforth said.

"It's kind of like a landmark," Ven said. "I have people in their 70s who stop here, and they say they've been stopping here since they were babies."

"They've got to get the signage right," Ben said. "When we get the right signage on the overpass, things will be different in here."

Meanwhile, the restaurant's windows now are filled with huge signs saying, "Pie Special/\$2.95; Deluxe Burger/\$5.95; Breakfast Special/2 eggs, biscuit/2 bacon, and hash-browns/\$3.95."

"If someone comes in and says, 'I want this but I don't have enough money,'" Terry said, "I say, 'Sold.'" ■