

Fort Hill gas-convenience store closes

Hope still bubbles up at the restaurant and lounge

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

The sign on the door of Fort Hill Fast Trip, the gas station and convenience store, reads: "We regret to inform you that we are closing our doors. We appreciate all of your business and support."

Windows are boarded up.

Next door, in front of Fort Hill Restaurant, a sign visible from the highway reads: "ODOT, tear down this wall," reminiscent of the words President Ronald Reagan used in 1987 to prod the Soviet Union to tear down the Berlin Wall.

Such was the scene after Monday, Oct. 26, when Rick Ven paid the last of his employees, and the first shoe dropped at Fort Hill's commercial hub.

Ven's three-year venture in the gas and convenience store business followed nearly a dozen in the same space when Truax Harris Energy LLC operated the site, and many more under other local ownership before that.

Ben and Terry Goforth have operated Fort Hill Restaurant on the site next door for almost 30 years. Fort Hill Lounge, at the back of the restaurant, has thrived for more than 15 years.

But Highway 18 safety concerns put these businesses on a collision course with the Oregon Department of Transportation, as well as Yamhill and Polk counties. For more than a decade, the governmental entities have been moving a process forward to improve traffic safety in the area, even recognizing that safety improvements would come at great cost to the Fort Hill businesses.

The \$18 million project that walled the highway off from the businesses and eliminated an intersection was completed earlier this year. Some say that the wall has only moved the traffic safety issues to the west where customers realize that they have passed their Fort Hill destination and try to turn around.

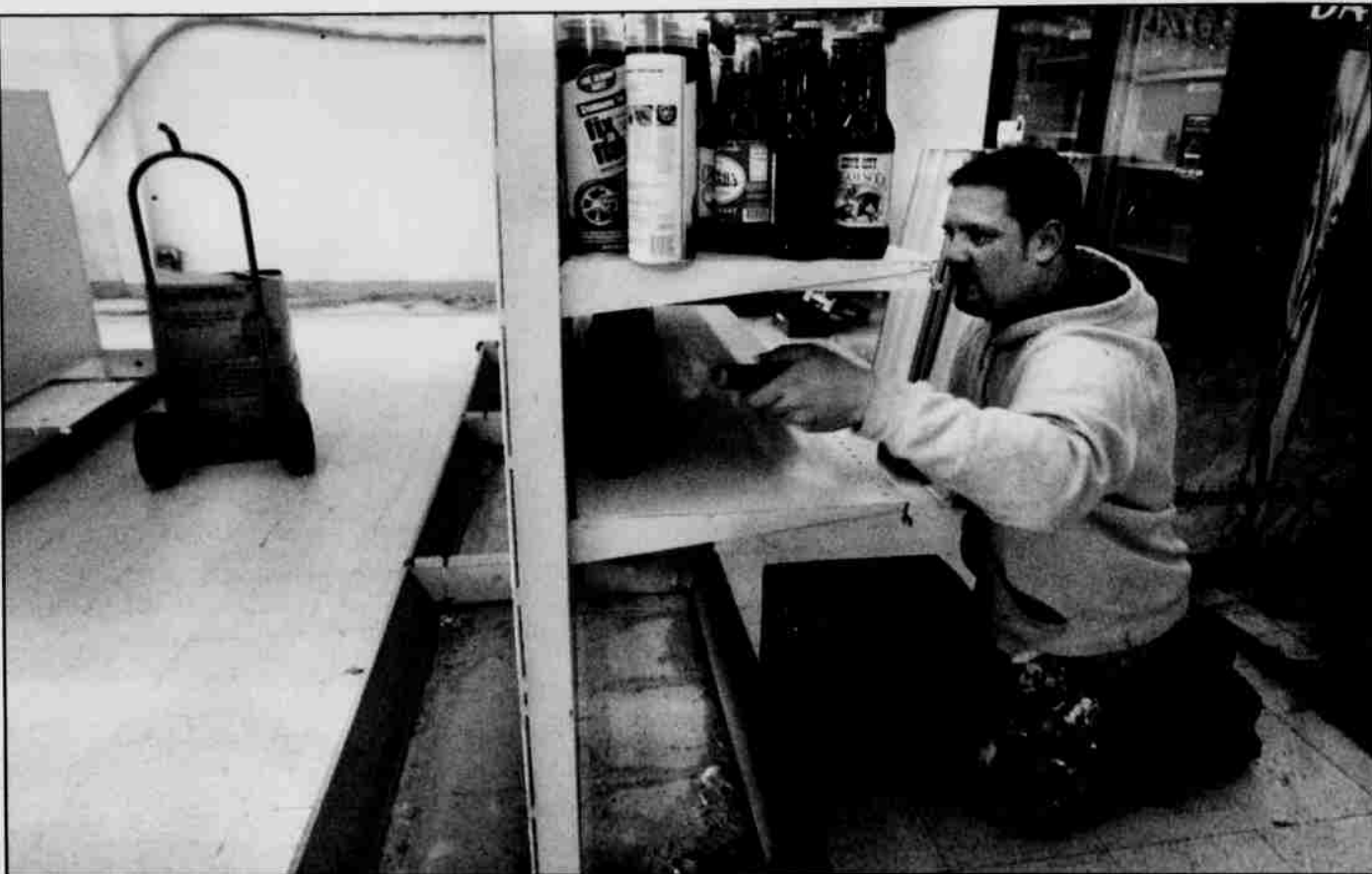
A few years ago, said Sarah (Goforth) Jones, daughter to the owners, "We had two cooks, three waitresses, a bus person and a dishwasher, and we kept them all busy through their shifts."

Today, Jones handles a shift alone with cook Derek Doornbas. "When my dad was working, the service was always so fast that waitress Joyce Elmer knew better than to hang her ticket up unless she was ready to pack it out," said Jones.

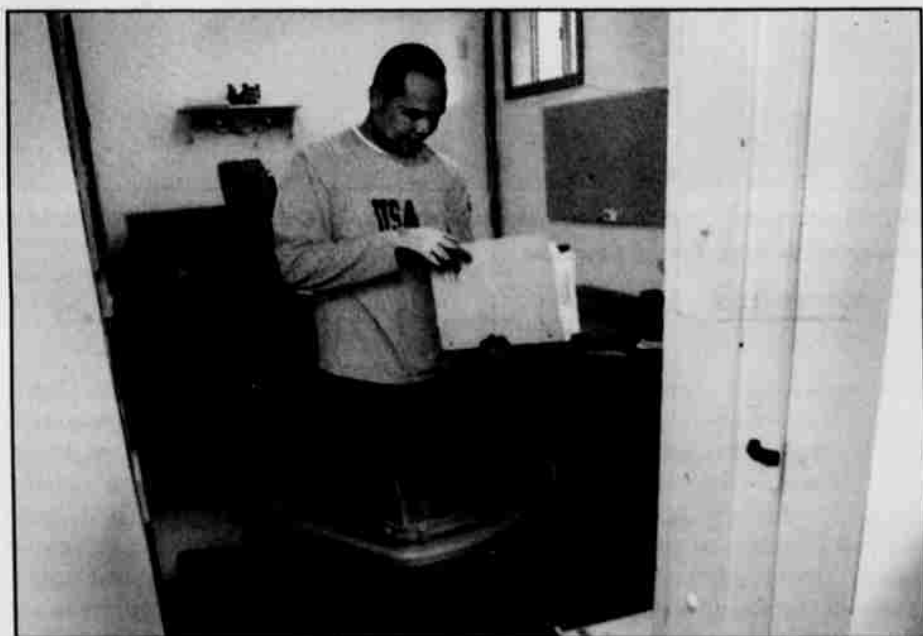
On a recent Friday morning, though her father is no longer working, it wasn't saying so much that the service is still very fast. Barely a table was occupied, though three filled in before too long.

Business is down for the restaurant by 50 percent, Jones said, and the same figures hold for Fort Hill Lounge, according to bartender and 12-year manager Jennifer Cizek.

"I cried the night they closed," Cizek said of the gas station and



Photos by Michelle Alaimo



Above, Todd Smock packs up bottles of soda as he helps clear out Fast Trip Gas and Food Mart at Fort Hill on Friday, Nov. 6. The store closed on Monday, Oct. 26. Business has been dropping since May when the Oregon Department of Transportation completed the Highway 18 road project and a new concrete barrier was erected.

At left, Fast Trip Gas and Food Mart owner Rick Ven cleans out the manager's office of the convenience store on Friday, Nov. 6.

convenience store. "Even though we're three different businesses, I've always thought of us as family."

As far as the gas station and convenience store are concerned, seven-year employee Don Beck said, "I knew as soon as the wall went up that we were through. You know, there's plenty of room for a right-off."

The complex interplay of safety and community business hinges today on the cost of access rights. Early in 2008, ODOT paid almost \$1 million to Truax Harris Energy LLC for "right-on, right-off" access to the property, said Don Jordan, ODOT's District 3 manager. To see the access returned, even if traffic safety concerns could be managed, "They'd have to pay back the cost of the access rights."

As current owner Mike Souza understands it, the access potentially could be purchased for some \$350,000. "I'd rather put \$100,000 into the property," said Souza.

Already, Souza has invested almost half that amount into building a fenced and covered outdoor smoking area, complete with tables and a stage.

Souza purchased the property in August 2008 from Truax Harris



knowing that direct highway access would disappear. He believes he can make this property go without that access.

"Try to find a smoking area that can compete with this," he said, even as he, Ven and a half-dozen others from the community and businesses pulled together to empty out the convenience store facility.

Souza is not giving up, not by a long shot. "If we can make it worth their while to take the exit, we can make this work," he said. "With education and time, I think we can be back to where we were or even

better as a destination stop."

The lounge is sponsoring dart, pool and golf tournaments. It is advertising Ladies Nights with special drink prices, and Super Ducks nights with a free drink going to anybody wearing an Oregon Ducks' T-shirt or hat.

"The community is what keeps the doors open," Souza said. "They've been extremely supportive of keeping us here. That's why I want to improve the place: to give back to the community, to make this the kind of place they want."

For the west end of the building that housed the convenience store, Souza is talking up plans for a one-bedroom apartment.

Sweeping his arms around the empty rooms, he said, "Everybody that hears wants to know more about it."

The Goforths haven't thrown in the towel, either, said Jones, who practically grew up in the restaurant. "She's a fighter," she said of her mother.

And the first business failure at Fort Hill has not been lost on the state Department of Transportation, either.

"We're still looking into options," Jordan said. "What it would take (to provide the businesses with direct access), considering the rules and the laws we work under." ■