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What Impact Will Whole Foods Have on Lafayette Businesses?

By *Sophie Braccini*

On June 6th the Lafayette Planning Commission approved the plan presented by Whole Foods for a new store. The store is scheduled to open in the early spring of 2011 in the shopping center at the north corner of Mt Diablo Boulevard and First Street. After years of negotiations, this is good news both for the company and the owner of the site that has been vacant since Albertson's left the city. But to Lafayette's independent grocery stores, Whole Foods could be a dangerous competitor.

Whole Foods Market is a supermarket chain that started with one store in Austin, Texas in 1980. It operates 270 stores in North America and the United Kingdom. With an emphasis on organic and high quality products, the new Lafayette store will compete directly with two locally owned businesses; Ed Stokes' Diablo Foods and Sue Jun's Open Sesame. Both stores promise to fight, but it looks to be a difficult battle. On the other hand, the city of Lafayette welcomes the new store arriving in a long-empty lot; the popular retail business is sure to bolster city coffers with sales tax revenue.

"We are a dinosaur in this day and age," says Ed Stoke's daughter Connie Collier, "we are an independent, family-owned business that has been part of the community for so long. We are ready for Whole Foods and are not afraid of the competition." Collier believes that Diablo Foods' business model, which emphasizes quality and locally made products, has a chance. She added that it will be good for Lafayette to have more choices.

Lafayette City Manager Steven Falk agrees, "Lafayette is a major center for high quality and organic foods - just check out Bill Fujimoto's hand-picked organic produce at Diablo Foods, the Thursday Farmer's Market, Open Sesame, and Trader Joes. The addition of Whole Foods merely confirms what we've all known for a long time," says Falk.

Just steps away from the incoming Whole Foods Market, Sue Jun runs Open Sesame. Another independent business, Open Sesame features organic products, specialty goods like gluten free food, and a large selection of health supplements. "We have been in business in Lafayette for 25 years," says Jun, "when Trader Joe's arrived it hurt business a little at first, but we sell a very different selection. Whole Foods is another matter; they have more buying power than we do - we can't compete with them." Jun is not giving up though, she says she has a loyal base of customers and plans to be even more creative and offer different products than can be found at Whole Foods.

For the city of Lafayette, there does not seem to be a flip side to the arrival of the new business. The plan approved by the Planning Commission includes an off-site parking area for employees at the corner of Deer Hill Road and Mt. Diablo Boulevard. Property owner Joan Bruzzone has promised to enforce the two-hour parking limit in her lot so it does not become over crowded. The look of the new store should enhance the appeal of the shopping center. The plan proposes to demolish the pop-out atrium that Albertson's had added and restore the covered outdoor walkway. Under that walkway, outdoor seating will be provided for customers. Other stores in the shopping center might suffer at first from congested parking, but it is likely that additional foot traffic will be beneficial.

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