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Prendergast’s foray into convenience-store market comes to an end

Saukville resident Chuck Prendergast’s foray into the convenience-store business has come full circle with the sale last week of the Quik Stop Shoppe Citgo at 1605 N. Wisconsin St. in Port Washington.

PORT WASHINGTON BUSINESSMAN Chuck Prendergast said he has learned some valuable lessons while operating two local convenience stores and an auto repair shop.

Photo by Mark Jaeger

The gas station and store are now owned by Mad Max Inc., the West Bend company that bought Prendergast’s Quik Stop Shoppe on Port’s south side about four years ago.

Prendergast continues to own the Tires Unlimited auto repair shop on North Wisconsin Street, but he said the convenience store sales were made “to ease into retirement.”

Somewhat coy about revealing his age, he said, “Let’s just say I am north of 70.”

Prendergast traces his arrival on Port Washington’s automotive scene to April 1, 1971, when he purchased the Eidenberger auto service and tire shop on North Wisconsin Street.

Previously, he had 10 years experience selling Goodyear tires.

“The tire store came with six different pumps on two sides of the building, and at that time each pump had just one grade of Spur fuel,” Prendergast said.

About a decade later, he bought the Texaco station immediately to the north of the tire store, thinking it would be an ideal location to offer oil changes and minor auto repairs.

That strategy never took off, but Prendergast wasn't willing to give up on the property. The notion of expanding into retail sales began to take shape, but not without a few obstacles.

"We decided to build a gas station and convenience store, but it took a year for us to convince the bank," Prendergast said.

That delay forced him to comply with newly enacted regulations from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources on gas stations.

"We were one of the first gas stations that fell under the new state rules, and frankly they didn't really know how to put them into effect," Prendergast said.

The time required to work those regulatory matters out was put to good use, as Prendergast did all of the necessary legwork on the building project to get the plans in place.

"We finally got the approval from the state in June of 1990, and by Labor Day — just 90 days later — that the building was up and occupied. Everyone did yeoman's working putting that building up," he said.

About five years later, Prendergast build another gas station-convenience store, this time on the far south side of Port.

"They were three miles apart and built with two different markets in mind. The north store was built to attract traffic coming off I-43, and the south store was aimed at people coming to Port on Highway 32," he said.

After selling the south side store, Prendergast entered into a partnership with Sanfilippo's Sentry in 2008 to implement the Pump Perks program. Gas discounts are offered to customers who spend a set amount on groceries or buy designated items at the nearby grocery store.

"It cost a considerable amount of money for Joe (Sanfilippo) and for us to participate, but it made sense to us if we wanted our businesses to remain viable," Prendergast said.

The program has been so successful, it has opened the way for some creative charitable giving. In November, a 10-cent-per-gallon donation incentive at the gas station allowed Prendergast to make a $1,000 gift to the Stars and Stripes Honor Flight.

Under the sales agreement for the gas station-convenience store, Mad Max Inc. has agreed to continue the Pump Perks discount gas program for at least 90 days.

Forty years of experience in managing retail businesses has given Prendergast some insight into what makes the local economy tick.

Although the demands of operating an auto-repair shop are markedly different than running the convenience stores, Prendergast learned that following similar standards could lead to success.

"There really is a kinship between the two businesses. We learned that in both cases, customers are very price conscious and want clean facilities with a friendly staff," he said.

"A lot of owners of gas station-convenience stores have learned they have to keep a close eye on the return on their investment or they are going to end up going out of business. There are any number of examples of local owners who over-extended themselves, and you can see what happens."

Prendergast said the blight of vacant gas stations popping up around the country should serve as a cautionary tale to municipal planners. That lesson is that helping existing businesses thrive can be for the greater good of the entire community.

He cited the wary reception Village of Saukville officials gave to plans for the construction of a Kwik Trip store and car wash in that community's Highway 33 corridor, which already has several similar stores.

"If a community welcomes a new business that ultimately leads to an existing business or two closing, where is the net gain? The Port Washington-Saukville area is blessed with some well-run convenience stores and gas stations, but there is a limit to the number a community can successfully support," Prendergast said.

"That is especially true with the way the market has changed today. The demand for gas stations is less now as people have learned to get by with driving less because of the cost of fuel, and they are driving more fuel-efficient cars."

On the subject of empty commercial buildings becoming white elephants, Prendergast, a former Village of Saukville trustee, said current village officials showed foresight in setting rigid standards that resulted in the local Walmart store expanding its current building rather than abandoning the site for a different location.

"Nobody would have gained by having an empty building there," he said.

Prendergast said it has become trendy for government leaders to say they are pro-business, but insisted an even-handed approach is needed.

"It has taken a long time for Port Washington officials to realize there is more to the business community than just the downtown. A little recognition of the challenges businesses on the edges of the community face can be just as important as promoting the downtown," Prendergast said.