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Leaders say fall opening offers chance to alter ‘business as usual’ attitude

If the turnout at Tuesday’s Port Washington Chamber of Commerce breakfast meeting was any indication, the city’s business community is still buzzing about the anticipated arrival of Duluth Trading Co.

More than two dozen business people attended the informal gathering at Beanie’s restaurant, most full of questions and suggestions involving the retailer moving into the former Smith Bros. restaurant building this fall.

Sara Grover, executive director of Port Washington Main Street, said the development organization worked closely with the retailer, guiding store officials in their decision to open “a second flagship store” in the city.

Duluth Trading Co. began as a catalog clothing business in 1993. It opened its first retail store in Mount Horeb in late 2010, and since that time Grover said the outlet has become a cornerstone of that town’s business community.

“The management team at Duluth Trading Co. said they were looking for a location where they would be the community’s anchor retailer. They considered several communities in Wisconsin, including Cedarburg, but found what they were looking for in our downtown,” Grover said.

The store is expected to create 23 new retail jobs, including management positions, with applications being accepted later this summer.

After making substantial improvements to the first floor of the former Smith Bros. building, store officials intend to open in Port in early October. Franklin Energy will continue to occupy the second floor of the building.

Grover said store officials were unconcerned about missing Port’s traditional tourist season with the fall opening, stressing their goal is to capitalize on the surge in sales during the Christmas season.

City officials have been working with store officials on tentative building plans. Repairs to the front facade fascia have already started.

“No substantive plans have been submitted yet, but they are expected in the next week or two,” Port Washington Mayor Scott Huebner said.

“They are talking about making $1 million to $1.5 million worth of improvements to the building. The plans call for relocating the front door to a central location, refurbishing the deck and adding a rear loading dock for merchandise delivery.”

Huebner said store officials have said they hope to add considerably more signage than the city’s codes allow.

“They believe in signage. The city is willing to work with them on that,” he said.

Part of the preliminary signage plans include retaining the iconic neon Smith Bros. fisherman sign on the roof of the building, Huebner said.

As at its Mount Horeb location, store officials expect the Port shop to be open seven days a week.

Grover told the business owners that schedule sets the tone for other local retailers and should mark the end of the “business as usual” approach in Port.

“Traditionally, downtown businesses have been reluctant to be open for extended hours, but if you intend to take advantage of the opportunity that Duluth Trading Co. is presenting and make Port Washington a real destination, you need to think about putting your best foot forward,” Grover said.

That includes having retail stores open on weekends and evenings, she said.

Long before the store opens, some downtown shop owners are curious how a store that has drawn as many as 50,000 customers a year is going to disrupt the status quo in downtown.

Parking has already been cited as a potential challenge, but Huebner insisted it is an obstacle that can be overcome.

“Port Washington hasn’t had an opportunity like this in its downtown for a long time. It will have its challenges, and if issues arise you have to let us know — contact your alderman, our progressive police department or Main Street,” he said.

“If we don’t know about problems with things like parking, we can’t do anything about them. Don’t sit back and get angry about it. Make your concerns known.”

In a delightful twist of irony, downtown businessman Dan Micha used the Chamber meeting to unveil bright yellow T-shirts he created with Uselding printing in Port Washington.

The shirts are meant to raise money for Port Washington Main Street, but they proclaim a prophetic message on the back.

Along with a plug for the Website www.visitportwashington.com is the slogan “There is life after Smith Bros.”

Micha said he came up with the wording long before the Duluth Trading Co. plans surfaced.

He also said the arrival of the store should be used as a launching point for making building improvements and cracking down on the proliferation of cigarette butts on downtown sidewalks.

“I am fed up with seeing peeling paint on downtown buildings. We need to use this as a chance to show a little more pride in our buildings,” Micha said.

“The excuse door is shut.”

Image Information: PORT WASHINGTON BUSINESSMAN Dan Micha (right) showed Port Washington Main Street Executive Director Sara Grover a new T-shirt proclaiming “There is life after Smith Bros.” Duluth Trading Co. plans to open a store in the former restaurant building this fall. Photo by Mark Jaeger