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Retail Notebook: Wallingford Center picks up some new shops

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Wallingford Center is buzzing again, and it's not just the sugar in Trophy Cupcakes that has people talking.

The cupcake and vintage party goods store, positioned welcomingly at the front entrance of Wallingford Center, is part of the refreshed look of the shopping gallery.

Last week, Pharmaca, a drugstore with both a traditional and an organic approach to health and beauty, held its grand opening as the anchor tenant for the center.

Bad Woman Yarn from Oregon is opening later this summer with shelves of colorful skeins, needles and hooks for the latest generation of craft addicts.

Those are just some of the recent changes designed to revive the shopping hub.

Developer Bruce Lorig drew fans and rave reviews 22 years ago when he converted the 1904 Interlake Elementary School in Wallingford into two stories of retail with 24 apartments on the top floor. But after a couple of decades, the glow started to fade.


A year ago, Wallingford Center merchants were wringing their hands over the vacant spaces, remodeling that dragged on forever and empty hallways.

Now, just in time for summer, Lorig has turned the slump around, once again charming neighbors into visiting with an energetic collection of tenants. The new air conditioner is finally humming, coats of paint are drying, fountains are burbling on the patios, and parking is plentiful.

With better weather, activities inside the center are spilling outside. The Wallingford Farmers Market is held in the parking lot each Wednesday afternoon, starting at 3 p.m.

"It has worked out well," Lorig said. "The last two years have been a real strain. We spent a lot of money so we can be here another 20



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Karen Ducey / P-I

Shoppers order up some sweets at Trophy Cupcakes in Wallingford Center. The bakery is part of the center's revitalization.

years."

Getting the mix of shops just right was a puzzler. One tenant, a bagel maker, was ready to sign the final contract when it suddenly pulled out because of problems within its company.

"It became sort of a domino problem," Lorig said. "It was very frustrating for the tenants. It was very frustrating for everyone."

There are still a few vacancies, and Lorig is searching for the right tenants to fill the openings.

"There is some strategy to leasing these spaces," he said. "You can't just lease to anyone."

Now that Pharmaca is in, Lorig is breathing easier.

Discussions with Pharmaca took more than a year, he said. "They thought they would be able to open in January, now it is June."

Barry Perzow founded the new-concept drugstore a little more than six years ago in Boulder, Colo. The blend of a traditional pharmacy and natural or homeopathic remedies was a hit with the healthy-living community. Perzow started looking for similar neighborhoods to open more stores. He found a similar success in Madison Park.

After a few years of cultivating the concept, the company is now in an all-out growth spurt with plans to open a new store every four to six weeks on the West Coast.

The short-range plan calls for as many as 10 new Pharmaca stores in the greater Seattle area in the next two years.

The Wallingford Center was a natural choice, Perzow said.

"The Wallingford community has very down-to-earth consumers," Perzow said. "They are hip, cool, educated consumers who really appreciate the value of what our store brings to the market."

"Other drugstores really haven't adapted to the changing demographics and the idea of healthy aging. We want to get our stores into the right communities as fast as we can, as long as the concept is still fresh," he said.

Besides a traditional pharmacy where you can get the prescription from your doctor filled, Pharmaca offers shelves and shelves of organic, naturopathic and homeopathic remedies.



Karen Ducey / P-I

At Wallingford Center, the new air conditioner is humming, paint is drying and fountains are burbling.

Perzow said he discovered Wallingford in the 1990s when he considered buying Wallingford Foods to convert into an organic and natural foods supermarket.

Before founding Pharmaca, Perzow was president of Capers Natural Food Markets, which started in Vancouver, B.C.

The company later merged with Alfalfa's Markets of Colorado, and in 1997 was bought by Wild Oats Community Markets.

Perzow said Pharmaca is unique in offering customers not just certified pharmacists, but also naturopaths, aestheticians and herbalists all in the store.

"Instead of supermarket staffing, we wanted to have an apothecary feel, like the Europeans do it, as opposed to conventional pharmacies," Perzow said.

Pharmaca focuses on women seeking natural health and beauty aids for healthy and graceful aging.

"We appeal to women who are conscious about what they are putting onto their bodies as well as into it," said Kelly Miano, Pharmaca's senior marketing manager.

Recent studies have suggested that there may be health risks from chemicals and concoctions that are absorbed through the skin in lotions and cosmetics, such as hair dyes or nail polish.

Pharmaca attracted a crowd for its grand opening.

Trophy Cupcakes owner Jennifer Shea baked up 600 mini cupcakes for the event.

"People like to eat three or four, or five of them," she said.

The six-month-old cupcake maker has already attracted accolades from food reviewers and magazine "Best of" lists, including Seattle Bride.

"I was worried at first about this place being a little slow, but I think with Pharmaca here now, things are really going to get busy," Shea said.

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