



Your Online Source for NORTHWEST BUSINESS MONTHLY MAGAZINE

NEWS TIPLINE: editor@nwbusinessmonthly.com

Volume 36 • Issue 4 • April 2011

Business in Paradise

Area's recreational bounty pays dividends

By: John D'Onofrio



Quality of life: Everyone wants it. It's a hot commodity and here in northwest Washington, we have it. Lots of it.

Whatcom and Skagit counties enjoy an embarrassment of riches when it comes to recreational opportunities. Whether it's to be found in the glacier-sculpted mountains of the North Cascades, the sparkling blue waters of the Salish Sea, the green forests of the lowlands or even on the rolling golf courses that are so prolific here in western Washington; the opportunities to enjoy the great outdoors are plentiful.

The urban areas to the south have the upper hand when it comes to economic activity, no argument, but here, where the mountains meet the sea, we are the undisputed leaders when quality of life is the priority. And increasingly, it is the priority for businesses and business people who seek to balance their time between work and pleasure. We work hard. And we play hard.

In recent years our region has become renowned as a desirable place to live, work and play. A steady

stream of accolades has made sure of that (see page 12).

The benefits of this recognition are obvious. Although wages in our region continue to lag behind the rest of the state (and much of the country), the quality of life that we enjoy helps local businesses to recruit and maintain high-level workers. Living in our neck of the woods can be seen as a benefit for workers, right alongside health insurance and a 401K. Think of it as the X factor.

Quality of Life

As quality of life issues grow ever more important to workers everywhere, our beautiful natural setting and plethora of recreational options have become ever more important. A study by the Center for Urban and Regional Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill extols the up-and-coming benefits of offering workers the kind of quality of life attributes that we enjoy in abundance.

According to the report, "An increasing number of firms are seeking locations that will attract and retain a well-educated work force ... A growing body of research suggests that QOL (Quality of Life) is becoming an increasingly important consideration in modern business location decisions. This is particularly true for high-technology firms that are less tied to traditional location factors such as transportation costs, proximity to raw materials, and cheap labor. It is also likely that firms in other sectors will become more sensitive to quality of life factors as the diffusion of information technology and other global forces continue to push the U.S. toward a more knowledge- and technology-intensive economy." It seems clear that access to the kind of recreational bounty that Whatcom and Skagit counties enjoy is becoming more important – and more valuable to the businesses that are located here as well as serving as a powerful inducement to attract new businesses from more urban areas.

It is common practice for local firms attempting to lure skilled workers from outside the area to highlight the many opportunities to enjoy our great outdoors – hiking, biking, paddling, sailing, golf, etc. These quality of life factors help businesses attract – and keep – their most valuable resource; high quality personnel.

Recreation Businesses Going Strong

Additionally, opportunities abound for businesses that tap directly into the recreational milieu. We have an entire business sector that has been created to help people enjoy our luscious surroundings – from outdoor gear shops to kayak touring companies.

One of the most well-known of these is the venerable American Alpine Institute (AAI), founded back in 1975 by Dunham Gooding. "I loved climbing, knew I was a good teacher, saw a niche that was unfilled, and wanted to increase my income while teaching writing part time at Western Washington University," Gooding explains.

"When the business blossomed, I changed my career goal from teaching literature at the university level to running an international guide service."

Over the years, AAI has become one of the premier businesses of its kind in the world. The New York Times described AAI as "the Harvard of mountaineering schools."

Gooding likens the experience of climbing a mountain to running a business. "Like a lot of things in life, climbing requires the exercise of good judgment and the use of some specific skills that need to be applied correctly.

"Like business, climbing takes place in a very complex and potentially hazardous environment. Little mistakes can mean wasted time, damage done, or lost opportunities, while thoroughness, perseverance,



AAI Director Dunham Gooding: "The lessons learned in climbing can easily be applied to business."

effective teamwork, and good judgment can mean the achievement of major goals.

"Certainly the lessons learned in climbing can easily be applied to business. In both climbing and business you do extremely well if you have clearly identified strategic goals, if you develop a sound operational plan, and if you execute the operational plan with precision."

And according to Gooding, business people are well represented amongst AAI's clients. "Business men and women seem to be the most likely group to get hooked on climbing, and I think it is because of the problem solving. It's what they do in business all the time, but in climbing their decision-making has immediate, tangible consequences. Instead of measuring their progress or achievement on a quarterly basis, they see it every quarter hour. The complexity is great, and while the stakes are very high, the hazards can be mitigated through their skill and good judgment. As a result, the sense of accomplishment is enormous."

AAI currently operates in six states and 16 countries. Among its future plans are several programs with an undeniable appeal for business people; a three-day Mt. Baker skills and ascent programs for individuals in particular occupations (weekend programs for people working in law, accounting, insurance, etc.) and a program dedicated to the teaching of leadership skills – leadership centered on climbing but which can be applied to work in business, nonprofits and government.

Gooding is a firm believer in the benefits of outdoor recreation for professionals. "Outdoor recreation is really important because its "fun factor" can readily get people to make physical exercise a part of their lifestyle," he notes. "Healthy lifestyles make happy and healthy workers and leaders."

He's also proud of AAI's contributions to the local economy, citing the many clients who visit our area from throughout the United States and abroad (84 percent come from out of the area). "Typically this is our clients' "trip of the year," he explains, "so they spend money with enthusiasm while in our area."

AAI also supports a laundry list of environmental organizations, including local groups like the Whatcom Land Trust and the North Cascades Institute.

Despite the economic downturn, AAI's business is strong – and growing. In 2010 they set a new record for gross sales, and 2011 is on track to eclipse that record.

Another popular local business catering to recreation-lovers is Fairhaven Runners, started by Steve Roguski in 1999. Combining his love of running and his love of the area was what got him started.

After 12 years, Roguski is still enjoying himself. "The satisfaction of knowing (and hearing) that we help many folks in our community attain their walking and running goals," makes his job fun, he says. "Their lives are better for the lifestyle and we remain proud to be an important part of the process. Personally, knowing we have created good jobs, good relationships and enjoy the lifestyle very much ourselves is also quite satisfying."

"Even in my dreams," Roguski says, "I didn't know it could eventually be this right and this satisfying."

And the results have been impressive – sales and profit have grown every year since Fairhaven Runners opened for business.

Like AAI, Fairhaven Runners supports the local community in a variety of ways. "We organize, sponsor or support hundreds of events each year," he explains, "from fitness forums, funs runs, weekly walk/runs, clinics, talks, team events and races to injury prevention sessions at the store."

Economic downturn? Apparently not an issue for the recreation industry. As Dunham Gooding might say – onward and upward!



Fairhaven Runners' owner Steve Roguski loves his work.

