

THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

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A Bellwether of change on the waterfront ... Bellingham area showing different tenant mix as new buildings are completed

DAVE GALLAGHER - THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

When Bryant Engebretson arrives at his office at Bellwether Way, lately he's been noticing more than picturesque views of Bellingham Bay - there are more people around.

"I've definitely seen an increase in the number of people walking around, especially since CH2M Hill moved here (in August)," said Engebretson, who owns Tradewinds Capital Management, a financial services firm. "While you can still find parking, it's now pretty full."

Bringing more people to the waterfront was the Port of Bellingham's goal when it began redeveloping the area about 10 years ago, but Bellwether Way growth didn't follow the original vision.



When Hotel Bellwether opened in 2000, the expectation was that boutique retail shops would play a big role in the nearby buildings. Early on, that seemed to be the case: Some of the first tenants in the area included a high-end clothing shop, a jewelry store and a photo gallery.

Today, finance, medical, government and professional services populate much of the mixed-use buildings, and the trend is continuing with the Bellwether Gate development, which is adding four buildings with about 137,000 square feet of space.

Along with CH2M Hill adding 200 employees to the area, a government agency has made a commitment to the area. The Department of Homeland Security-Customs and Border Protection recently agreed to a 15-year lease to occupy Bellwether Gate C, currently under construction near Anthony's Hearthfire Grill. The agency will occupy the second floor of the 10,000-square-foot building, which was designed by Grinstad & Wagner Architects and is being built by Ebenal General Inc.

"(Bellwether Way) has become a professional center," Engebretson said. "In the summertime, the area is popular with the public, so it's a nice mix."

MORE PLACES TO EAT, TOO

The rise of professional service tenants and government agencies has led to a flourishing restaurant scene. The small stretch of property currently is home to five restaurants, the newest being Giuseppe's Al Porto Ristorante Italiano.

Since moving from downtown Bellingham into his Bellwether Gate space in August, Giuseppe Mauro said the number of customers has exceeded his expectations. He estimates about 60 percent of his current customers were regulars at the downtown restaurant, while the other 40 percent are new, including people from the nearby hotel and offices or those living outside the region.

"It's such a beautiful area, not just to eat but to walk around and enjoy," Mauro said. "This new building gave me a chance to create the restaurant the way I wanted it, using the atmosphere of this area."

Other eateries will soon be arriving. Kookaburra Coffee & Wine House is working on plans to move into the Bellwether Gate A building, currently home to Giuseppe's and CH2M Hill. And a tenant improvement application was recently filed at the city for a Subway sandwich shop in the same building.

There's also the two Anthony's restaurants, Harborside Bistro and Kuru Kuru Sushi.

Mauro said the variety of restaurants will keep all of them competitive, to the benefit of the customers, but also thinks the demand is there for all to succeed.

"We all do different things, so I think it's a positive that we're all close," he said. "People can have choices."

Engebretson said the number of restaurants is also a benefit for the professional service workers, because the business lunch is a good way to work with clients.

"It's nice to have the variety," he said. "No restaurant really overlaps the other."

LOVE THOSE TOURISTS, TOO

While there are more year-round workers in the area, the summer months are expected to remain crucial for many businesses in the area. Sam Min, owner of Kuru Kuru Sushi, said summer events make a big difference for his restaurant.

"Summer time is when I do the most business, and I expect that to continue," he said.

The seasonal aspect of Bellwether Way has made running a business there year-round a challenge in the past 10 years. Even as the new buildings are going up, there are still empty storefront spaces in the original mixed-use buildings.

One spot about to become vacate is 8 Bellwether Way, now occupied by the clothing store Diva Boutique. In need of more space, the store is doubling in size by moving downtown to 1323 Cornwall Ave.

While the store has grown to the point that it needed to expand by being at Bellwether Way, much of the growth has come from Internet sales, said Gina Whaley, store manager.

"(Downtown) has more foot traffic and is more of a shopping district; this move will also allow us to add some new lines," she said. "We've enjoyed being here, but we're excited about this move to appeal to more local shoppers."

CH2M HILL MOVE BENEFITS MORE THAN 70 LOCAL NONPROFITS

The task of CH2M Hill moving from the Flatiron Building in downtown Bellingham to the waterfront meant leaving a lot of old office equipment and other materials behind - about 40 tons of it. After weighing its options, the engineering firm contacted Bellingham-based Sustainable Connections to figure out the best way to donate the equipment.

Mariah Ross, a sustainable business development manager from Sustainable Connections and Mary Jensen, the spouse of a CH2M Hill employee, put together a "Toward Zero Waste Plan," which involved contacting local nonprofits to find out what they needed and to assess what could be recycled. More than 70 area nonprofit organizations received equipment that was otherwise slated for a landfill, according to Sustainable Connections.

The Re Store and Hardware Sales also became involved, acquiring items not taken by the nonprofits for re-sale. NW Recycling took the remaining materials at no charge.

For businesses interested in the Toward Zero Waste program, contact Sustainable Connections at 360-647-7093.

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