

Independents in Spenard Join Forces

New Chamber of Commerce created

BY JOETTE STORM

Small business is alive and well in Alaska, and its capital is Spenard. Once the butt of jokes about its winding main street and quirky culture, this Anchorage neighborhood now has its own brand new Chamber of Commerce to advocate for the locally owned businesses and their needs.

Barb Smart, president of the Spenard Chamber and owner of Alaska Leather, says there are nearly 500 businesses in the area defined by Hillcrest Drive and International Airport Road, stretching west from C Street to Lake Hood near Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport.

"Spenard has an abundant variety of successful, independent businesses that offer some unique opportunities. It is like a little city with every service one needs," she says.

It's also the hippest neighborhood in Anchorage, with dozens of ethnic restaurants and shops for books, art and hobby supplies, baked goods and scads of services from tailors to chiropractors. One resident calls it the "muscle power" area for its sports shops like AMH, REI, Inner Dance Yoga Studio and several bicycle shops.

New businesses such as Spenard Roadhouse chose to locate there. And three years ago, tapping into the sustainability movement as a way to build community, locals Mark Butler and Rene Haag, organized the Saturday Market in the Chilkoot Charlie's parking lot. It has been wildly successful attracting shoppers from all over town.

But why a staid chamber of commerce for such an offbeat area?

The issue that sparked the organizing effort was the proposed redesign of

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Spenard Road between Hillcrest Drive and 30th Avenue, according to John Weddleton, Bosco's Comics.

"After the long drawn out conflict over Arctic Boulevard, many businesses and residents decided we should present a unified position supporting a design that does not require taking any property from the adjacent businesses," he recalls.

Vehicle and pedestrian safety and urban renewal are values they wanted incorporated in the redesign. Residents feel their investments in landscaping and buildings have not been met with improvement to the roadway. They want to be able to compete with new retail developments in other areas of the municipality where State and Municipal dollars have improved roads.

"We want our customers to be able to safely access parking lots and businesses and be able to walk between businesses safely," Weddleton says. "And because we are open year round, we must have adequate snow storage areas."

The group has done its research on costs and safety and is urging the municipality to move ahead with a design that combines three and four lanes,



Photo by Gene Storm

Barb Smart, owner of Alaska Leather, recently upgraded her business by moving to a former restaurant in Spenard on the corner of Minnesota and Spenard Road. She says the variety of independent businesses makes Spenard the place to shop in Anchorage.

while meeting national standards at a lower cost.

In addition to offering such advocacy for the businesses, the group hopes a chamber will provide a platform for working together to keep Spenard the vibrant shopping, dining and entertainment district started in 1916 by a character named Joe Spenard.

"We're a bunch of free-wheeling independent businesses tethered to the same three-mile strip of asphalt and to the boundless notoriety of Spenard," says Weddleton, who designed the chamber's snazzy website spenard.biz.

The website features Spenard's history with anecdotes about Joe Spenard, the nightclub owner for whom the neighborhood is named. □