

Neighborhood grocers filling a need for convenience

Fewer long trips to the supermarket

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Shul Steele was just picking up a tomato for a salad and some cheese and wine for dinner one night earlier this month -- not really noteworthy, except that she was downtown at what she considered her neighborhood grocery.

Sometimes as Seattle changes, as more people move into high-priced condominiums and apartments downtown such as Steele's home at Seventh and Olive -- the evidence of change comes in small scenes.

Such as picking up a tomato.

Steele moved from West Seattle to live closer to her job as a customer service agent at a downtown brokerage. And it seemed as though everything was within walking distance -- her job, the movies, restaurants.

But no supermarkets. And the mini-markets still sold fortified wines and warmed-over pieces of fried chicken under orange lights. Grocery shopping meant schlepping out to Safeway or QFC in lower Queen Anne, or Capitol Hill.

These days, however, grocery stores such as the Westlake Specialty Market, next door to the Metropolitan, have opened, and others are planned to target the growing residential population downtown.

Thampipillai Thilakarajah, 43, said he'd moved to Washington from New York to start exporting apples to Sri Lanka. But when the apple export business got more competitive, he opted to capitalize on those living downtown and opened the West End Grocery store near the Harbor Steps apartment complex. In March, he opened the Westlake Specialty Market, and now he plans a third downtown grocery store, at the Cobb Building, around April.

The customers still make the weekly pilgrimage to grocery stores, he said. But if you have the money, why stand in a long line at the supermarket for a quart of milk, when there's a grocery next door -- even if a quart of milk costs \$2.39 at the Westlake market, compared with \$1.29 at Whole Foods.

Andrea Taylor, 30, was coming out of Bartell Drugs at Fourth and University earlier this month, after leaving work downtown at 6:30 p.m. She said she lives in lower Queen Anne, but the supermarket is a long trip, so she grabbed a frozen dinner before she caught her bus home.

Bartell spokeswoman Rebecca Siegmund said the store is intended to serve thousands of office workers, but the shelves also are stocked for people moving downtown.

Bartell sells the aspirin and notebooks you find in any pharmacy. But a shelf a couple of weeks ago also was stocked with bags of Japanese rice, Creole rice, canned vegetables and boxes of corn flakes.

Charles Staadecker, a downtown commercial realty estate agent, said grocery stores are the businesses responding most visibly to people moving downtown. Some of the influx is empty-nesters, he said.

"The empty-nesters are used to entertaining at home, but they don't want to spend the day preparing meals. Their last years are important to them, and they spend it wisely, going to symphonies or theaters," he said.

Ralph's Grocery and Deli, which has been at Fourth Avenue and Lenora Street since 1984, remodeled five years ago and began offering more upscale products such as canned tomatoes imported from Italy to attract the influx of residents, said store manager David Thorp.

Other changes -- beyond grocery shopping -- to accommodate residents downtown may be on the way.

Pacific Place marketing manager Lynn Beck said the shopping center may make a seasonal delivery service year-round, and the mall has been seeking stores that would attract new, downtown residents.

A Barney's of New York, slated to move into the space formerly occupied by Pottery Barn in late May, will be another place to go shopping.

The Sixth Avenue Wine Cellar, a wine bar, is another place where residents and shoppers can stop in for a glass of wine.

Local Color, a coffeehouse in Pike Place Market, started selling wine and beer last week, and owner Angela Albanese says she plans to start staying open past 6 p.m. soon to catch people beyond the after-work crowd.

Spokesman James Haydu said the market is planning to work with concierges at new condos to advertise itself as the neighborhood farmer's market.

But for all the gourmet groceries and customer service downtown, Lex Reis, a 54-year-old public relations consultant who was shopping at Westlake Specialties market, said one thing hasn't changed downtown.

"There was this homeless guy lying on the street," he said. "So I went upstairs and got some blankets for him."

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