

Downtown grocers betting a laneway leads to success



Sarah Pepper and John Kent stand at the laneway entrance to their store, J&P Groceries.

DAVID BEBEE, RECORD STAFF

Grocery store and café to benefit from the area's tech sector and condos

Terry Pender, Record staff

KITCHENER — Sarah Pepper and Johnny Kent want to transform a downtown laneway into an urban nook that attracts passersby and shoppers into their newly opened J&P Grocery in the back of 8 Queen St. N.

"We think that bringing the vibrancy to the laneway, and really attracting people to that, and saying: 'Hey look at this cool, open space that is going to be for pedestrians,'" said Pepper.

"You can sit, you can have a coffee, you can enjoy the sunshine. It will really open people up to this area and let them kind of find it," she said.

Even in the brick-walled heart of downtown, people fret about parking. Pepper and Kent note there are two parking lots and a parking garage within steps of their new store.

"We do love our location," said Pepper. "We like it because it is smack-dab in the centre of downtown."

Goudies Lane bisects two downtown blocks, giving shoppers easy access to city-owned parking lots.

The City of Kitchener is planning improvements to Queen Street from Charles Street to Duke Street, and a facelift for Goudies Lane.

"We are going to have a little market stand out there," said Pepper.

The building at 8 Queen St. S. houses the fast-growing startup Vidyard. J&P Grocery caters lunches for Vidyard as well as for other downtown startups.

Pepper and Kent also are targeting residents of downtown condos.

J&P Grocery includes a 4,000-square-foot grocery store, a 1,000-square-foot coffee shop on the mezzanine level, and a lunch counter with daily specials.

The store announced a soft opening on Twitter a couple of weeks ago.

"We needed to do it quietly," said Kent. "There are a lot of moving parts between the café, the kitchen and the grocery floor. It is a lot of manage and stay on top of."

A grand opening, complete with a party in Goudies Lane, will happen in early summer.

Pepper and Kent have a background in catering.

"And that's what we based a lot of the business plan around, so we hit the ground running with that catering, and it allows us some time and leeway to figure out the other parts," said Kent.

"That has been rocking and rolling since November out of a satellite kitchen," Pepper said.

With about 1,000 followers on Twitter, J&P

had shoppers through the door right away. Pepper and Kent closely monitored what they are buying. They will let demand guide what they carry.

"That is the most interesting part for us," said Kent.

"It's important to us to listen to the people who are coming to us on a regular basis," added Pepper.

From a café table overlooking the grocery store, Pepper can see the green wall where selected plants will soon be growing.

"We are going to grow some basil, herbs, Boston leaf lettuce, maybe some baby kales, things like that," said Pepper.

The kitchen makes grab-and-go lunches every day at about 10 a.m., including sandwiches, salads and a hot soup. Buyers are welcome to take their lunch up to the café.

J&P Grocery joins a growing list of downtown stores that sell groceries. Just steps away is Legacy Greens at 10 King St. E. Two of the most established grocers in the downtown are ethnic markets — the New City Supermarket at 236 King St. E. and Ben Thanh at 468 King St. E.

The Shoppers Drug Mart at 250 King St. W. also sells groceries. On Saturdays, there is the Kitchener Market at 300 King St. E.

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