

Hardware store coming to Eastside

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4-26-11

Owner invests \$500,000, plans to hire 12

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SANTA CRUZ — Longtime local Rodney Hoffer is bringing back Santa Cruz Hardware.

The owner of Aptos Hardware and Westside Hardware, which both carry the Ace Hardware brand, Hoffer's investing almost \$500,000 to open an independent store. The location is 1214 Soquel Ave., in the heart of the Eastside business district.

Hoffer got the keys to the former Blockbuster Video store from landlord Bei-Scott Company last week and plans to remodel and reopen in July.

He will hire about 12 new employ-

ees.

"I'm extremely excited," he said, choosing the name the Santa Cruz Hardware in honor of the historic business — founded in 1883 — where he got his start.

"It's an incredible location," he added. "I've been looking for a good space on the Eastside for 10 years."

A hardware store owner since 1986, Hoffer, 61, of Corralitos, has survived an earthquake and a roller coaster of an economy.

He became his own boss after 15 years of working in high tech when he bought Santa Cruz Hardware.

Why hardware? He grew up on

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DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Rodney Hoffer, owner of Ace Hardware stores in Aptos and on the Westside of Santa Cruz, is opening an independent hardware store in the former Blockbuster Video store at Soquel and Seabright avenues.

HARDWARE

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a farm in North Dakota, 11 miles from the town of Kief, population 100, named by Ukrainian settlers.

"On a farm you're always fixing stuff," Hoffer said.

Over the years, he bought three hardware stores and closed two, adjusting to changing times.

His latest project, in 2007, increased the size of Westside Hardware by 50 percent in the wake of the Mission Street Safeway expansion.

That investment paid off.

"We expanded the inventory," Hoffer said. "Things have been good. It's been positive every year."

He had been talking with Bei-Scott Company for about six months when Blockbuster announced the shutdown as part of a Chapter 11 bankruptcy reorganization, then took its giant blue sign off the building. Bei-Scott will repaint the exterior, now a steel gray.

The Eastside store is 5,000 square feet, about the same size as Hoffer's Westside store, and will have a similar layout.

Aptos architect Chuck Burket is overseeing the remodel, with work being done by friends or employees putting in overtime after their regular shifts.

Hoffer estimated fixtures, equipment and computer system cost about \$130,000, with another \$350,000 for inven-

HARDWARE HISTORY

North Dakota native Rodney Hoffer has been a local hardware dealer in Santa Cruz for 25 years. Here's a short history:

1986: Bought Santa Cruz Hardware, founded in 1883, on Pacific Avenue in Santa Cruz

1989: Bought Eastside Hardware at 1817 Soquel Ave. in Santa Cruz; Santa Cruz Hardware red-tagged after earthquake damage and store operates in a tent for a year before moving to 703 Front St.

1994: Bought Aptos Hardware and moved it to Rancho del Mar Shopping Center in Aptos

1995: Bought Westside Hardware in Almar Shopping Center in Santa Cruz

1996: Closed Eastside Hardware, after death of landlord

2005: Closed Santa Cruz Hardware, with lack of parking a factor

2009: Moved Westside Hardware to larger space in Almar Shopping Center due to Safeway expansion

2011: Leased 1914 Soquel Ave. in Santa Cruz for 15 years; plans to open Santa Cruz Hardware in July.

tory.

He's squeezing the start-up money out of cash flow rather than approaching a banker for financing. He would like to open this month but it will take six weeks to get fixtures ordered from a company on the East Coast.

The city permit process, in contrast, was speedy.

"I got the permit the same day I went down there," Hoffer said, noting that use remains retail and parking met the city requirement.

Hoffer plans to move a third of the employees from the Westside and a third from Aptos to give the new store a veteran workforce.

He expects to hire about a dozen new employees to fill the resulting openings. Appli-

cations are being accepted at the Aptos and Westside stores.

For this store, he is taking a new approach. Instead of relying on the Ace brand, as he does in Aptos and on the Westside, he plans to be an independent, making his own choices about products based on his experience.

"I want it to be my own hardware store," he said.

"It's cool he's trying that model," said Lydia Corser, who owns Greenspace, which specializes in green products for home and business building projects. She hopes the two retailers will cooperate to compete, a new trend known as "co-opetition."

Although the Eastside area recently lost a longtime retailer,

Gateways Books & Gifts, it has gained a new one, Monkey Girl Beads, bringing moms with children in tow, and Cayuga Vault, under new ownership, is being remodeled.

In addition, caterer Joshua Keenserver plans to open Conscious Creations in May or June in the former home of Black China Bakery and Cafe Tazzina.

Keenserver, 34, of Pleasure Point, plans an all-organic cafe and bistro with a farmers' market.

"I'm so stoked to be here," Keenserver said.