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Town beats village to natural food store

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By Victoria Welch

For Heather Belcher and Ellen Fox, this month's market study report recommending a specialty grocery store in Essex Junction gave a little relief and a whole lot of validation.

The report describes precisely what they've worked for two years to bring to Essex -- a natural food store offering locally-grown products with an emphasis on natural or organic food. While village officials and residents continue to discuss the possibility of ultimately bringing such a store to Essex Junction, Belcher and Fox said they are about 12 weeks away from actually opening Sweet Clover Market at the Essex Shoppes & Cinema.

The pair described the timing of the market study as serendipitous, reassuring and downright uncanny.

"How often does someone starting a business get someone else to pay for marketing that we can share with our investors?" Belcher asked with a laugh Thursday.

The market study was commissioned by Essex Junction village officials to entice grocery officials to consider a village store. The Onion River Cooperative has expressed tentative interest in bringing a market to the village.

Belcher, of Westford, and Fox, a St. Albans resident, decided two years ago to take a do-it-yourself approach to many of the issues Essex Junction residents are discussing. As mothers of young children, both wanted to shop for healthy food choices for their families while supporting the local economy. Farmers markets and farm stands were great, but were available in limited time frames.

The Sweet Clover concept emerged, and grassroots focus groups and market research was conducted to gauge whether area residents were interested in such a market and where it should be sited. Belcher said the results were decisive -- yes, there was a market for the idea, and it would be most convenient and effective within the Shoppes & Cinema.

"We're on people's paths, where they're going now," Fox said of the location -- 4,000 square feet formerly home to Paradise Burritos.

Trucks transporting local products can easily reach the location, just off the Circumferential Highway, she said. People traveling to Essex from Jericho, Underhill or Westford won't have to travel through the busy Five Corners intersection to reach the market.

The store site is near the Hannaford Food and Drug Superstore at Essex Shoppes & Cinema. Fox said she believes -- and market research indicates -- that the location will help both stores, instead of hindering either.

"People aren't going to be able to get everything they want at one market," Fox said. "People are going to four, sometimes five supermarkets a week."

Sweet Clover's approach is different, the owners said. With a business model based on natural food markets, this store will serve as both consumer location and communication hub.

"We want people to get to know local farmers by name. They may not meet, but they'll know what they look like," Fox said. "The goal is to be this network of small producers, to plug into an existing environment."

All the better if the village hosts a natural food market -- the demand is high, they said, and can support two stores. The women have attended village market meetings and said they been impressed by the enthusiasm.

"We so appreciate the passion, the perseverance at the meetings," Fox said. "That same passion is what inspired Sweet Clover Market."

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BOX: Sweet Clover online

Information about Sweet Clover Market is available online at www.sweetclovermarket.com

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