

Organic, natural, local grocery planned for Essex

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As Essex Junction officials and residents continue to examine the possibility of bringing an Onion River Cooperative market into the village, a Westford resident said she and a partner will offer local, natural and organic grocery items up the road in Essex early next year.

"Based on the market research we've done, we've learned that there is a lot of demand for this kind of product, this kind of store," said Heather Belcher, co-owner of the planned Sweet Clover Market, which will open at a location within the Essex Shoppes and Cinema by March 2006. "We really want what's best for the community and the local farmers, and we just want to be part of that."

Belcher, 32, and St. Albans resident Ellen Reardon, 32, have spent the past year developing the plans for Sweet Clover Market, after deciding on a do-it-yourself approach to filling a void in the local grocery scene. Belcher said she and Reardon, who both have young children, had struggled to find time to make the shopping choices they wanted to make and wanted a place where they could buy local, organic and natural that was close to home.

They decided on about 4,000 square feet of space in the Essex Shoppes and Cinema, the former location of Paradise Burritos, after focus group research indicated that residents desired a store with an easy access location. The market will be located near the Hannaford Food and Drug Superstore but will provide products and educational material that will set it apart from the supermarket, Belcher said.

"We know we can't meet everyone's grocery needs. We don't expect people to stop shopping at Hannaford's," Belcher said. "Our goal is to make it an easy shopping experience for those who do want both. And increasingly, more people do want that."

Onion River Cooperative opened the City Market in Burlington in 2002. Belcher and Reardon were among more than 100 people who crowded into the Essex Teen Center on Nov. 2 to discuss the possibility of the co-op's expanding to an Essex Junction location. Belcher said she was pleased to see the turnout and positive response to the Onion River possibility, and "just wanted to get up on a chair and tell everybody who we were and what we were doing."

Tuesday's meeting was the first in what could be grass-roots discussion about the possibility of bringing the cooperative to Essex Junction, and residents said they were pleased by the prospect of a local community center with an assortment of conventional and unconventional grocery items for sale. Nothing was set in stone, and a steering committee of meeting attendees will again discuss the idea this month.

Charles Safford, Essex Junction village manager, said village officials had expressed interest in bringing Sweet Clover to the village, but wished the new venture well at its Essex location.

"It will not necessarily be competing with what we may do down here," Safford said. "It may help people who are looking for that product line, but it still doesn't discount the desire of folks to have something in the village to meet their needs."

Officials from City Market and the Onion River Cooperative could not be reached for comment.

Belcher said she understood village residents' desire for an Essex Junction market; the possibility of a cooperative is something she and Reardon are taking into consideration.

"Whether or not City Market is going to come, they have a lot of options, and we'll certainly take that into consideration as we plan our future. We're still forging full-steam ahead," Belcher said. "I know we're not going to be able to meet the needs of everyone who was in that room, but for some of them, we will. If City Market does come, we can coexist peacefully."

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