

# Buy local, attract global

Local business, tourism two driving factors for South Whidbey economy

By Carolyn Tamler

**SOUTH WHIDBEY IS** defined more by its personality and sense of place than by specific industries or businesses. Geographically, depending on who you ask, the definition for South Whidbey:

1) extends from Clinton up SR 525 to a phone booth at Classic Road; 2) extends from Clinton up SR 525 to just south of the Greenbank Farm; or 3) is where people can get Whidbey Telecom service. The specifics about the permanent population are anecdotal; no one knows at the present time how many households are occupied year round or have residents who fly away for a month or more to warmer climates during the winter months. Best estimates are that about 15,000 permanent residents live between the Clinton ferry terminal and Greenbank Farm.

With only two major manufacturing enterprises, what defines “business” for South Whidbey tends to be local retailers, small businesses, restaurants, professionals, artists and craftsmen, small farms, charming stores and places to prowl, and a sense of a time and place all too rare in today’s often frenetic cities and towns.

Some of the high-end artists, craftspeople and specialty merchants rely heavily on buyers from off the island, but there is solid agreement that to keep businesses thriving and surviving, especially when the tourist popula-

tion thins out, South Whidbey needs to encourage residents to buy locally and to use the services of local professionals.

## THE FOUR SOUTH END COMMUNITIES

Langley, with about 1,000 residents, is the only incorporated town on South Whidbey. Clinton and Freeland are two unincorporated communities, although Freeland is looking for a public vote on incorporation at some future time. It currently has 2,300 people in its NMUGA (non-municipal urban growth area), and 4,000 people in greater Freeland. There’s also the Bayview community, part of which is considered within the greater Langley area, while another part identifies with Clinton, and most businesses in Bayview Corner are members of the Langley Chamber of Commerce. The two major manufacturers on South Whidbey are Nichols Brothers Boat Builders and Interstate Label, both located within Freeland.

Nichols Brothers, with about 140 employees, is the largest private employer on the South end of the island. Whidbey Telecom, South Whidbey Schools, the Star Store,

Payless Grocery, Lind’s Pharmacy, Ace Hardware, Lumberman’s and a few other retailers each provide many jobs.

No agency or government entity has an exact count, but including all of the home-based companies, there are numerous businesses on South Whidbey. The South End has three chambers of commerce. Currently, Freeland is the largest with nearly 200 members, while Langley is fairly close in size with 180 members. The newly energized Clinton Chamber has 20-plus members and is hoping to build its membership substantially in the next several months.

Although Langley is the only incorporated town on South Whidbey, there are four distinctive communities, each with its own personality and business focus.

## Clinton

Clinton is a community divided, at least geographically. There are multiple, relatively small business cores created in part by the state highway, which separates the businesses on the north side from those on the south. In addition, there are two distinct retail areas



A new visitor information center just up the hill from the Clinton ferry terminal is expected to draw more business to South Whidbey communities.

"We don't want Clinton to become a mini-Highway 99, just a drive through on the way to or from the ferry."

Sherryl Christie-Bierschenk,  
Clinton Chamber of  
Commerce

— identified by some as "downtown" and "uptown" Clinton. Downtown Clinton is home to the post office, the library, the community hall, the Park and Ride, a few small shopping centers and a sprinkling of other retail and service businesses. Uptown (just up the hill from "downtown") is defined primarily by Clinton's largest retail complex, Ken's Korner Shopping Center, and is also built on a mix of businesses that are oriented toward serving the local residential and business population. There are a few restaurants and several bed and breakfasts that depend



Downtown Langely is a popular place for locals and tourists alike.

on tourism to sustain their financial wellbeing.

Currently, the largest employers in Clinton are Lumbermens, the South Whidbey Community Clinic, Ken's Korner Red Apple and Sebo's Do-It-Center (actually located in Bayview but with a Clinton address, each

employing between 15 to 20 full- and/or part-time employees. A large number of home-based businesses also call Clinton home.

The Clinton Progressive Association that owns and operates the community hall (Clinton Progressive Hall) and the re-emerging Clinton Chamber of

# SUMMIT BANK

Large Enough To Serve You. Small Enough To Care.

**Please contact one of our helpful  
New Account Representatives at:**

**BURLINGTON**

723 Haggen Drive P.O. Box 805 (P) 360.757.0100 (F) 360.707.0200

**MOUNT VERNON**

2120 Freeway Drive P.O. Box 2120 (P) 360.848.5000 (F) 360.848.7910

**CONCRETE**

45872 Main Street P.O. Box 426 (P) 360.853.8171 (F) 360.853.7636

Bilingual Service • Established 1914  
[www.summitbank-wa.com](http://www.summitbank-wa.com)

# Relax!

**We have No Hassle  
Free Business Checking**



- Minimum Opening Balance \$50.00 • No Per Item Fees
- You only pay for your check orders • Free Online Banking



**MEMBER  
FDIC**





Fred Lundahl, owner of Music for the Eyes in Langley, is the new Langley Chamber of Commerce president.

that owns and operates the community hall (Clinton Progressive Hall) and the re-emerging Clinton Chamber of Commerce are the primary facilitators in an effort to bring more cohesion to the Clinton community.

Two newly elected officers of the Clinton Chamber, Sherryl Christie-Bierschenk, board chair, and Vicki Thompson, administrative officer, share a vision that Clinton will become a vibrant business hub in which people

will be able to make a good living close to home in a community and environment they enjoy. Christie-Bierschenk adds: "We don't want Clinton to become a mini-Highway 99, just a drive through on the way to or from the ferry." The pair sees 2008 as "Clinton's coming-alive year."

### Langley

Langley relies heavily on tourism with its wide assortment of small businesses providing handmade arts, crafts and foods. The chamber is working closely with Whidbey-Camano Tourism to draw more visitors to the island. Fred Lundahl, owner of Music for the Eyes, an exotic carpet and textile shop, is the new chamber president, and he notes that, "The Langley

**"The Langley Chamber of Commerce is often the first stop for tourists as they come onto Whidbey."**

**Fred Lundahl,  
Music for the Eyes**


*It works well. It's a proven tool. Everyone swears by it.  
All it takes is horsepower, willpower, persistence and sweat.*

**Then came the tractor.**  
*Why are you still using tape back-ups?*

**ExxactImage**  
Diversint's back-up solution



*Back-ups made simple. Discs that don't break your back.*

[www.exxactimage.com](http://www.exxactimage.com)  **Diversint, Inc.** **360 428 7065**

Chamber of Commerce is often the first stop for tourists as they come onto Whidbey."

Lundahl observes that South Whidbey has been feeling an economic hit from two directions. First, the loss of the Port Townsend ferry in November has had a huge impact on retail businesses on the island, clear down to Langley. Even though some ferry service has been restored, it is not at its former level, and many people are confused about whether service is still offered. Some confuse the service from Mukilteo with the Port Townsend ferry. These misperceptions have had a major impact.

Second, the recession is being felt by most of the retail businesses on the island, especially those offering non-essential items such as artwork, handmade jewelry and craft items. Fewer people appear to be coming to

merchants are focusing on developing more Web business.

Business people are all too aware that to survive they need to attract locals, and they need to be sure that local people invite friends and relatives to the island and take them to Langley, Lundahl said. The largest employer in Langley is the South Whidbey School District, and the largest retailers are the Star Store (which also has a small store

### Buy local

Whidbey Telecom has developed a list of nine major reasons for people to support local business:

1. Buying locally protects our local character and prosperity.
2. Local businesses sustain communities, link neighbors and contribute to local causes.
3. Business decisions are driven by people who live in the community and feel the impacts of those decisions.
4. Dollars spent locally have a far greater impact than those spent elsewhere. Local spending simultaneously creates jobs, improves neighborhoods and promotes community development.
5. Locally owned business means more local jobs with wages supporting local people.
6. Support of local entrepreneurial efforts serves as a means for moving families out of low-wage jobs.
7. Local businesses help to sustain vibrant, compact, walkable town centers, which reduce urban sprawl, automobile use, habitat loss, and air and water pollution.
8. A community marketplace supporting many small businesses is the best way to ensure innovation and low prices over the long-term.
9. A multitude of small businesses guarantees a much broader range of product choices by listening to the needs and desires of the local community.

in Bayview) and Lind's Pharmacy.

Langley rates as a great place to spend an evening with three theaters (Whidbey Island Center for the Arts, the Whidbey Children's Theater and the Clyde Movie Theater), many excellent restaurants and lovely B & Bs.

Langley is working on marketing to the local community more by creating more community events. Several new events have been developed, such as the "Welcome the Whales Day" held this year on April 19, and "Friday Night Flights," where several local restaurants host wine tasting and provide hors d'oeuvres on the first Friday of each month.

### Bayview

Bayview Corner is a part of the Langley Chamber and is a unique blend of businesses aimed at locals, but also a delightful spot for tourists. Bayview Corner was developed by Goosefoot, the largest commercial developer on South Whidbey, which happens to be a nonprofit organization. Goosefoot

developed Bayview Corner as a locally oriented center providing goods and services for the community. It recently acquired nine acres across the highway at SR 525 and Bayview, and additional retail and professional space, and possibly a community meeting space, are in the works. Whidbey Telecom has its headquarters in Bayview, just up the road from Bayview Corner (and an administrative office in Clinton).

Bayview is known for its two farmer's markets. The Bayview Farmer's Market is located in the parking area between Bayview Hall and Bayview Corner, and just a short distance up SR 525 is the Tilth Market, which focuses on produce and locally made food items. Both markets operate from April to October. Although the markets are a great place to take tourists, they depend on the patronage of their regular local customers.

### Freeland

Freeland is the commercial hub for South Whidbey. Sales tax revenue



**SKAGIT**  
CONSERVATION DISTRICT  
SOIL • WATER • WOODLAND



**There are LOTS of ways to become involved with your local Conservation District!**

SCD offers a variety of programs to foster a healthy relationship between the environment and our community:

- Free resource planning and technical assistance for small and commercial farmers
- Forest Stewardship and wildlife habitat enhancement
- FireWise Communities Program
- Backyard Conservation Stewardship Program
- Water quality and stormwater protection
- Skagit Stream Team and Watershed Masters Volunteer Programs
- Annual events such as the Envirothon, 6th Grade Conservation Tour, school presentations, native plant sale, and much more!

*Serving Skagit County since 1942.*

**For more information on the Skagit Conservation District's FREE technical assistance, public education and volunteer opportunities, visit our website at [www.skagited.org](http://www.skagited.org) or call (360) 428-4313.**



## AREA REPORT

reported by the state Department of Revenue for 2007 shows that Freeland had revenues of \$89 million, almost three times that of Langley (\$33 million) and more than twice that of Coupeville (\$39 million). While the population of Freeland is one-seventh that of Oak Harbor, Freeland has sales tax revenue that is more than one-fourth its metropolitan island neighbor to the north.

Freeland currently has five banks, four mortgage firms, two escrow companies and two title companies. Recent new buildings include the new Maple Leaf Assisted Living complex with more than 70 one-bedroom units, a new retail and professional business complex at the corner of Main and Harbor Avenue, a new Windemere building at SR 525 and Freeland Avenue, additional warehouse space and Houdini's Billiards just behind the new Windemere building and a new Sheriff's office on East Harbor Avenue. The community is continuing to grow with many new projects in the works for this year and next year. Payless Grocery is expanding; Skagit Farmer's Supply plans to build a new store that will be more than double the size of the current space in Freeland.

### BUY LOCALLY

Chet Ross, president of the Freeland Chamber of Commerce and president of the Island County Tourism Committee notes "every dollar spent locally generates from \$3 to \$7 in additional business."

All the bad economic news has reinforced the determination of the three chambers and everyone with a business on South Whidbey to prioritize getting local people to make the effort to buy as much of the goods and services they possibly can in their own communities.

At the forefront of the buy local theme is Whidbey Telecom. The high quality of phone and Internet service provided by Whidbey Telecom is not what one would expect in a predominantly rural community, but Whidbey Telecom was the first company west of the Rockies to provide Internet access

in 1994. George Henny, whose father and mother founded the company, believes it is important for Whidbey Telecom to provide the most modern technology possible, while providing service that is highly personal and connected to the community. The family owned business' "Core Values" are listed on its Web site and acknowledges a deep understanding that people come to South Whidbey because they want the quality of life so evident on South Whidbey. At the heart of these values is a "think greener" motto, which means looking for opportunities to provide jobs on the island, including telecommuting possibilities, so that people who live here will have a deeper connection with their communities.

**"Every dollar spent locally generates from \$3 to \$7 in additional business."**

**Chet Ross,  
Freeland Chamber of  
Commerce**

Of course, people who live on South Whidbey appreciate the real value of shopping locally: the level of attention and personal service cannot be matched by the large, impersonal retailers.

### TOURISM: SO MUCH TO SEE AND DO

RoseAnn Alspector, the tourism marketing coordinator for Whidbey-Camano Tourism, believes that with the economy in recession, this is a perfect time to promote tourism in Island County. It has been the mission of her organization to develop a major branding campaign, out of which evolved the simple slogan: "A Short Distance to Faraway."

Alspector believes that tourism is vital to not only the economic health of Whidbey and Camano, but contributes to preserving what makes this area special: "Tourism can help preserve the

sense of place we currently have. South Whidbey is one of the few communities that has not been commercialized." She is quick to point out that what is particularly distinctive about South Whidbey is that most businesses are locally owned; no big box retailers exist.

A major component of the branding campaign has been the official designation of SR 525 and SR 20 as "Scenic Byways." Clinton is the gateway community to the Scenic Byway. Signage will be going up near the ferry terminal and at appropriate places along the highway by this summer.

The Langley Chamber of Commerce has developed a booking service on its Web site, [www.visitlangley.com](http://www.visitlangley.com), and currently there are 56 bed-and-breakfasts from South Whidbey (not just Langley) registered on the site. The Langley chamber has also been aggressively working with Whidbey-Camano Tourism on building back the tourism business for local retailers.

A new kiosk, at the corner of SR 525 and Langley Road, invites visitors to stop by and get information about Whidbey. The kiosk is a joint venture of the Freeland, Langley and Clinton chambers of commerce, and is the work of many volunteers from the two organizations. Volunteers are welcoming visitors and providing information Thursdays through Sundays from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Alspector has worked to develop a new web site ([www.whidbeycamanoislands.com](http://www.whidbeycamanoislands.com)), the new slogan, and increased awareness among the local business communities of how tourism can help preserve what people treasure about Island County.

Despite ferry problems and concerns about the economy, most business people on South Whidbey are optimistic. If recent history is a good indicator, they have reason for their optimism. The Island County Department of Economic Development reports that Island County revenues have been increasing an average of 13 percent a year. ■