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The Landscape: Cornelius

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Cornelius

by Michael Burnham

A mariachi trumpet blares as a middle-aged woman scoots in rhythm across the sharply buffed floor of Cornelius, Oregon's newest big-box store. Welcome to Wal-Mart, where shoppers can find corn husks, chile ancho and flan custard, tucked among the tall shelves of Lays potato chips and Coca-Cola cans.

Wal-Mart, which opened amid such fanfare last fall, is proving to be a boon for the economically struggling city, providing affordable goods and about 300 jobs, said Richard Meyer, Cornelius' development and operations director.

But if a city's strength lay in its economic diversity, then what's a mom-and-pop shop to do? Short of sufficient tax dollars to revitalize downtown on its own, Cornelius is extending a helping hand to locally owned enterprises that serve a fast-growing Latino population. Sometimes it means having a city official serve on a nonprofit's board. Sometimes it means penning a letter in support of a grant application. Sometimes it means widening sidewalks to encourage drivers to stop and shop.

"We're a city that doesn't have the finances to pay for socio-economic grants, so we work closely with the nonprofits and businesses themselves," Meyer explained. "We're just able to keep our heads above water as a full-service community."

The little things are beginning to bear big results in this city of about 12,000 people, which is nestled between Hillsboro and Forest Grove. In August, con-

struction crews will break ground on the Virginia Garcia Wellness Campus at the corner of 12th Avenue and Adair Street.

The Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center opened at the downtown site in 1975 to serve seasonal farm workers and day laborers. Virginia Garcia officials will be able to provide patients integrated medical, behavioral, dental and vision health services at the 42,000-square-foot wellness center, which will replace the existing clinic. The nonprofit will build the \$13.7 million wellness center, which will feature solar panels and green space, with the help of a \$12 million grant through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and a \$322,000 "Nature in Neighborhoods" grant through Metro.

Cornelius officials partnered with Virginia Garcia to obtain the Metro grant, penned a letter in support of the nonprofit's application for the federal stimulus grant, and offered input regarding the wellness center's design to ensure it reflected the city's vision for downtown, noted Christine Rontal, Virginia Garcia Memorial Foundation's executive director.

"Ultimately, one of the primary goals of this project is to make the wellness center a destination, a place where community members come, not only to take advantage of and enjoy a public green space, but to learn more about the environmental significance of and value such a project has on the health of their community," Rontal said.

The wellness center will anchor the re-

development of Adair Street, Cornelius's main westbound arterial, which features several blocks of new streetlights, sidewalks and trees. During the next year, the city will make similar improvements to Baseline Street, the main eastbound arterial, with \$20 million in federal grants.

The city also has plans to build a 16,800-square-foot library building on the site of a vacant parcel it acquired at the corner of 14th Avenue and Adair Street. If the city opts to move forward with the \$4.2 million project, the city would likely pay for it with a combination of private foundation dollars and government tax credits and bonds, noted Cornelius Public Library Director Karen Hill.

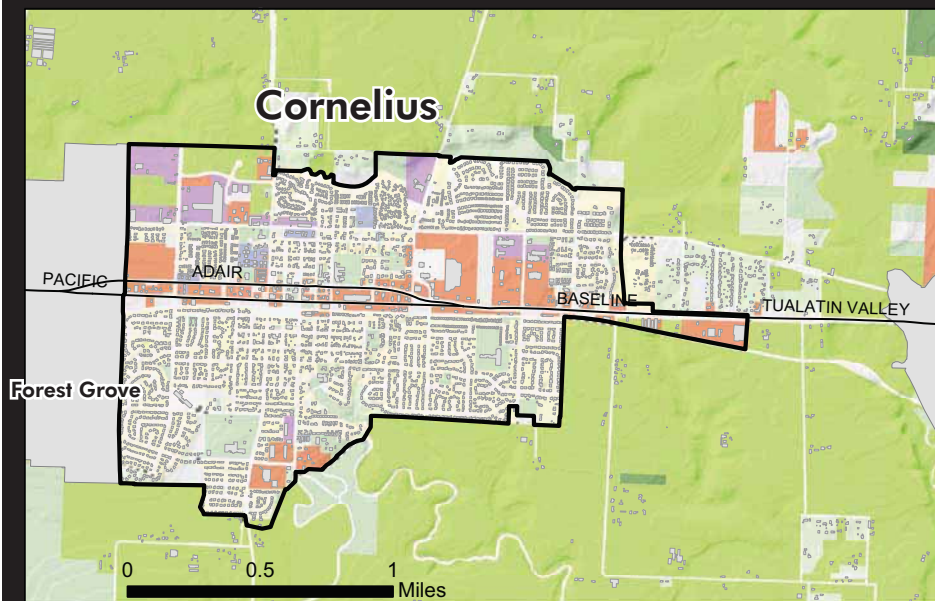
Cornelius is a competitive grant applicant, in part, because of its poverty, explained development director Meyer. About 13.6 percent of Cornelius' population lived below the poverty line, with a margin of error of plus or minus 5 percent, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2005-2009 American Community Survey. The Oregon Business Development Department lists Cornelius as "severely distressed" economically, and the Great Recession continues to take its toll.

Among the biggest casualties is Grande Foods, which shuttered its doors last year after a 4-year run as a specialty grocer. The 35,000-square-foot store featured a tortilleria and cocina to attract Latinos, who compose about half of the city's population but are among the worst hit by the sluggish economy.

"This economic downturn has been one of the worst for families," explained Jose Rivera, executive director of the Cornelius-based nonprofit, Cen-



Amaro Brothers Produce, Cornelius, Oregon.





Downtown, Cornelius, Oregon.

tro Cultural. “Many of the people we serve work in the agricultural industry, and when hours at work are reduced needs increase.

“It’s made this organization be more creative,” added Rivera, whose organization’s programs include teaching English as a second language and computer literacy.

The results aren’t necessarily brick-and-mortar buildings.

Centro Cultural, whose board includes Cornelius Police Chief Paul Rubenstein, is working with local churches and other nonprofits so as to not duplicate services, Rivera underscored. One of Centro Cultural’s key partners is the Forest Grove-based nonprofit Adelante Mujeres, which trains Latino immigrants how to farm organically and market their produce locally through its Adelante Agricultura program.

Last winter, Adelante Mujeres trained 33 people how to start and grow small businesses in eastern Washington County. Students who completed Adelante Empressas micro-enterprise training program have started 11 companies, ranging from a carpet-cleaning business to a hair salon, said Ali Brown, the program’s coordinator.

Adelante Mujeres is raising funds to rent the kitchen at Centro Cultural’s complex in Cornelius, Brown said. The commercial kitchen would be used to can locally grown vegetables and prepare catered meals.

Nicholas and Sabino Amaro, who emigrated from Mexico two decades ago, are among Adelante Mujeres’ successes stories. The brothers grow vegetables organically on small plots in Hillsboro and Forest Grove and sell their produce locally.

“It’s hard to grow vegetables, especially without any chemicals, but I’m proud to do this kind of farming,” Nicholas Amaro said as he stood amid his tables of organically grown radishes and onions at Forest Grove’s downtown farmers’ market. “People want this.” **M**