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Businesses cautiously optimistic on plant's impact

by Jesse Hirsch

An ethanol plant employing 41 workers will ultimately create 694 new jobs in the area through "dollars and services spent in the local economy," according to a 2002 study sponsored by the ethanol industry. With a new plant opening near Friesland, some local business owners are cautiously optimistic.

"I really don't know what it's going to do for us," said Cynthia Jackson, owner of CJ's Pizza and Hilltop Mobil in Cambria, the plant's closest gas station and restaurant.

The new plant started construction in fall 2003, and some businesses immediately saw an impact. Roger Kuhl, manager of the nearby 15-unit Randolph Motel, said all the rooms have been full since construction began.

"We'd get guys in here for three, four, five months ... we've had to turn away a lot of calls," he said. Now that construction is winding down, however, Kuhl is concerned about filling up his rooms, which go for \$100 per week.

"Come wintertime, we've got nothing," he said. "It's going to be tough."

Similarly, Joe Kramschuster, owner of the 16-unit Friesland Apartments, said he saw a significant impact during the plant's construction phase. Now he said only two people from the ethanol plant are living in the apartments.

Jackson said the construction phase was somewhat helpful to her business, largely because of eight to 10 dedicated workers from Volkmann Railroad Builders Inc. who ate lunch at her restaurant every day.

"Those railroad guys got me through winter ... I really can't complain," she said.

But Jackson, Kramschuster and others are very curious what the next few months will bring. Many of the plant's 34 permanent employees have been working for over a month. Most of them were hired locally, which could be the reason Janice Bobholz, owner of Friesland Foods grocery store in Friesland, has seen little impact on her business. Bobholz said she was hoping for a big increase in business, at least during the construction phase. Her

store makes deli sandwiches and pizzas on demand and she hoped to get some of the plant's lunch crowd.

Bob Lange, a member of the United Wisconsin Grain Producers board, made frequent trips into her store, telling her about the potential growth she could see.

"He was in here constantly for awhile, bringing in brochures and telling us all the business we could get," Bobholz said. "It sure didn't happen when they were building."

Bobholz said the ethanol plant recently opened an account with her, though, and that business has picked up in the last couple weeks. She is hopeful that things will continue to improve as word spreads about her store.

Lange said he is not surprised that a grocery store would not receive as much of an increase in business as other local merchants. He said it all depends what services the plant and its workers can use.

Lange said the plant has attempted to use local businesses for many of their needs, even though construction workers were brought in from out of the area and out of state. He points to contracts with Sam's Well Drilling in Randolph and EP Direct Printing, a Fond du Lac company with a branch in Beaver Dam.

Enos Bontrager, who owns Pride Originals handmade furniture store in Cambria, said the plant has given him \$20,000 to \$25,000 in business. His store made a variety of wood furniture, cabinets, kitchenettes and other "office stuff."

Bontrager, president of the Cambria-Friesland Area Chamber of Commerce, said that this boost to his business was a welcome surprise. He said there does seem to be an attempt by the ethanol company to use local merchants and services.

"I think (UWGP) is striving to work with local business as much as they can," he said.

Denise Fischer owns Denise's Cafe in Randolph, which was mentioned by Gov. Jim Doyle in a speech this weekend as a business that will see benefits from the new plant. Her restaurant has catered for two UWGP employee training sessions and Fischer said "some of the bigwigs" have frequented her restaurant for lunch,

"I wouldn't say it's been a huge increase in business," she said, "but we've definitely benefited."

Like many others, Fischer is reserving judgment on future gains from the ethanol plant. Bontrager, however, has nothing but hope. He said the plant is not only helping existing businesses; it could also help bring in new enterprises.

"This thing has the potential to draw a lot more businesses into the area," he said. "I really see Friesland expanding more in the future."