

Freshen up: Target, Mi Pueblo remodel Watsonville stores

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WATSONVILLE - Seems like everyone wants to fill your grocery bag these days.

Target on Main Street is working on a remodeling project so it can add fresh produce and meats to its lineup of pantry staples.

San Jose-based Mi Pueblo plans to revamp its store on Freedom Boulevard this spring.

And last fall, bargain retailer Grocery Outlet came to town, while La Princesa Market expanded its reach beyond the Crestview Shopping Center on Freedom Boulevard with a second outlet at the site of the former La Esperanza Market on Main Street.

"There's always competition," said Salvador Ahumada, who manages the Freedom Boulevard Mi Pueblo. "The way the economy is, we're trying to expand into where we know our customers need us."

Mi Pueblo opened its Watsonville store in 2004. Though Ahumada said it serves a diverse clientele, the store's decor and offerings cater to the city's large population of Mexican immigrants.

To one side of the entrance is a taqueria, which will be expanded under the remodeling plan. On the

other side, bins filled with dried peppers and corn and kiosks selling jewelry, tamales and cold drinks surround a "plaza," complete with a flowing fountain in the center. Nearby, on Tuesday, a woman stood behind a stand scraping the needles from fresh segments of prickly pear cactus, known as nopales.

According to analysts at The Food Institute, a New Jersey nonprofit that researches trends in the food industry, the outlook for 2011 includes fierce competition between eating out and eating in. That could bode well for Mi Pueblo's strategy of sprucing up its ready-to-eat taqueria.

But Ahumada said the remodel, scheduled to start in March or April, won't stop there. The entire store will get a face-lift to "give it a little more life."

At The Overlook shopping center on Main Street, a large section of the parking lot near Ramsay Park has been fenced off to stage construction at Target. Inside, walls at the back of the store are coming down.

Target is investing between \$2 million and \$4 million to upgrade each of its stores, according to corporate spokeswoman Amy Reilly.

The Watsonville store also has applied to state Department of Alcohol Beverage Control for a license to add liquor sales to its beer and wine offerings.

Reilly said the remodel is part of what's turning out to be a successful "fresh food" strategy to make stores a one-stop experience for shoppers.

After piloting produce and meat sales in two Minnesota stores in 2008, Target has continued the initiative in more than 400 outlets, she said. Another 400 of its 1,750 stores, including Watsonville, will be added this year.

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The remodeling also includes changes to electronics, beauty and shoe departments to make them more customer friendly.

"This just offers so much more to fill your basket, dairy, fresh meat, fresh produce, bakery items," Reilly said.

Target's filling its basket as a result of the changes, too.

"What we've noticed is a 6 to 10 percent lift (in sales) for the entire store," Reilly said.

Reilly said construction in Watsonville is expected to be complete by March, and the store will remain open during the work. Crews will concentrate on one section at a time to minimize impact on customers, she said.

Target last remodeled two years ago, adding 25,000 square feet to the 104,000-square-foot store, mainly through the conversion of an outdoor garden department.

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