

Grass Roots to expand product line at new location

By Kathryn Reed

Three-foot wide aisles with shelves packed from floor to ceiling are not the ideal shopping conditions – for consumer or storeowner.

That's why Jon McElroy is moving out of the location Grass Roots has been in since 1973 and moving across the driveway to the old Blockbuster building. With 1,200-square-feet of retail space today, when the new store opens in the spring it will have 4,000-square-feet devoted to natural foods.

“You will be able to see the products,” McElroy said of the new site. “Now you can't stand back far enough to see what's on the bottom shelf. And if gets crowded, it is annoying.”



Grass Roots will be moving almost next door in spring 2012.

Photo/LTN

Through the years McElroy and wife Sandra have thought about moving into a bigger place than their Dunlap Drive location in South Lake Tahoe, but the right place never came along.

Then earlier this year everything clicked. They bought the building that is next door, which also fronts Highway 50 at the Y. The Grass Roots sign is in place even though the moving date isn't likely to be until March.

"One reason we wanted to expand is there are a lot of new products, fun things (on the market). We go to trade shows and say we wish we could carry this and that, but where would we carry it?" McElroy said.

The McElroys look forward to being able to carry more products, expanding the produce section and creating a better shopping experience. He envisions it being a mini Whole Foods Market.

With the tight quarters of the current store, it's not possible to introduce a new product without taking one away.

Although the size of the store is much larger, with doubling the aisle space to 6 feet, much of the room will be used in cosmetic ways instead of devoted to sales. But at the same time, a more pleasant environment with more choices may keep the cash register ringing louder and more often.

Like most businesses, Grass Roots saw its bottom line take a hit in 2009 and 2010. McElroy said things have been on the upswing this year.

"People's shopping habits have changed. We have a sales flyer that comes out every month. They will look for specials and walk around with the flyer in hand," McElroy told *Lake Tahoe News*.

While people are price conscious, they are also turning their attention to better nutrition. This is one area where Grass Roots is attracting new customers – those who care about what's in a product and where their food comes from.

Lots of things need to be done to the building to convert it

from a video store to a grocery store. Gone are the blue carpet and yellow walls. Wood will be on the walls and the floor will be stained concrete.

Today's store has four little freezer doors. The new place will have 10.

Grass Roots is forming a partnership with Freshies for that South Tahoe restaurant to provide soup at the new location. It will be self-serve, with people able to get lunch on the go.

McElroy is talking to some people about turning the current Grass Roots spot into a café. The owner, who lives out of state, is likely to convert the upstairs back into apartments. Now it's used as office space and storage.

The bakery, which McElroy knows well, will remain in the current location because the process to create a commercial kitchen is too involved. It means the fresh breads will be sold at the new property.

McElroy first went to work at Grass Roots as a baker in 1978 when Karen and Jeff Miner owned the natural foods store. The Miners had opened it five years earlier. McElroy bought them out in 1985 – the same year he got married. The McElroys have been operating it ever since then.