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ReStore thrives: Habitat for Humanity business filled with bargains stays busy during difficult times

JOHN DODGE, The Olympian

OLYMPIA - Tough economic times seem to be a factor in an upsurge in business at the South Sound Habitat for Humanity ReStore.

The downtown Olympia shop that sells new and used building materials and home furniture at deeply discounted prices is busier than ever and expanding business hours at the store at 210 Thurston Ave. N.E., store manager Alex Bertolucci said.

Proceeds from the store sales help support the South Sound Habitat for Humanity homebuilding program.

When household budgets are tight, families are more likely to shop for bargains, which are offered daily at ReStore, Bertolucci said.

If an item is new, it's marked down to half of the retail price. For each month the item stays in the store, the prices drop another 25 percent, until it is either given away or offered at craigslist.org, Bertolucci said.

In 2008, ReStore diverted 170 tons of building materials that otherwise were likely headed to the landfill. That's 20 more tons than the store handled in 2007.

"Our volume just keeps moving up every year," said Bertolucci, 23, a student at The Evergreen State College who is closing in on a degree with an emphasis on nonprofit administration and sustainability.

An increase in donations also appears tied to the economic recession, Bertolucci said. For instance, sending unwanted and used building materials to the store is free and tax deductible. Taking them to the landfill costs money.

Here's a third possible reason the store is plenty busy: More people are turning to simple, practical do-it-yourself home-improvement projects, rather than hiring contractors for full-scale home remodeling projects.

The store was open for business on Sunday for the first time. The new store hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday.

"We feel by opening on Sundays, we will be able to make more of our inventory available to the folks who rely on weekends to do their shopping," Bertolucci said. It also provides more time for student volunteers to work at the store.

Increasingly, ReStore is serving as a place for high school students to earn community service credits required for high school graduation or for others to log community service hours required through the Thurston County Juvenile Court diversion program and other court-ordered service.

With the store inventory constantly turning over, keeping things tidy is a full-time job. Leslie Parks, 17, an Olympia High School junior, was busy organizing building supplies last week.

"The place kind of reminds me of Home Depot," she said after just 15 minutes on the job. "I signed up for 8.5 hours - paying my debt to society."

Each week, 60 to 100 people make donations to the store, including Will Hutcheson, who last week brought in some wooden floor tiles and pipe vents from the garage of a home built in 1904.

"I've probably donated more stuff than I've purchased," Hutcheson said. "My garage is just filled with stuff."

What will happen to those wooden floor tiles is anybody's guess, Bertolucci said. "I've given up guessing what people will do with the materials," he said, recalling how cabinet doors became signs and wooden table leaves were turned into skateboards.