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## Transit chaos drives shop to better home

Vancouver's rapid transit line traffic chaos drove a business to Fort Langley, which the owner calls a 'blessing in disguise.'

By Maria Rantanen

The roadwork mess and financial hardship suffered by retailers on Cambie Street in Vancouver has worked to Fort Langley's advantage, bringing a fresh new store and the business acumen and community spirit of Abby Palmer.

The Gardening Circle opened at its new location just two doors down from the entrance to Gasoline Alley in February, 2006, and features home décor items and gardening accessories.

Palmer had done her homework before leasing a retail store on Cambie Street, based on assurances by the city of Vancouver that the new rapid transit line would not affect traffic because it would be tunneled through.

After opening her store, the city did a turnaround and switched to 'cut and cover,' which has created gridlock along Cambie and its cross streets, and driven many businesses out of the area or into bankruptcy.

Palmer was one of the luckier retailers affected by the construction work of the Canada Line, since her lease expired at the end of 2005. She was able to cut her losses and look for a new location.

"I'm one of the good luck stories," Palmer said. "The RAV thing was a blessing in disguise. Without that threat, I wouldn't have moved."

A chance visit to Fort Langley's Cranberry Festival at Thanksgiving in 2005 made her fall in love with the community and decide to relocate there. "If a community like this can organize an event like this, I want in," Palmer said, calling the historic town "a jewel in the Fraser Valley."

Since Palmer relocated her Gardening Circle store to Fort Langley, business has tripled. "The face of Fort Langley is changing for the better," Palmer said, adding that the strict heritage guidelines are 'awesome,' but thinks the increase in business variety is a positive change.

Palmer is now president of the Fort Langley Business Improvement Association, and she remembers thinking how lucky she was, attending her first meeting, to be living and working in this community.

The association represents almost 100 businesses in Fort Langley, and works to make the area a thriving community, Palmer said.

Being a small business owner, Palmer said she has to remind herself to be "working on the business – not in it," that is, working to make the business grow and not just taking care of the day-

to-day business.

"My role is a support to the staff, not doing shifts," Palmer said.

Palmer employs four or five women part-time, depending on the season. Palmer said she has a vision of what the store should look like in a year and further down the road, and she needs to articulate that vision to her employees, so that they can work independently, each in their own area of expertise.

The home décor and gardening items sold at The Gardening Circle, which include cast iron bird feeders and decorative ladybugs and grasshoppers, concrete garden ornaments, and hundreds of other accessories as well as furniture, reflect what Palmer sees as an increase in the 'blurring of indoor

and outdoor.'

"It reflects how people are decorating these days," she said.

Examples she gives are waterproof fabrics on outdoor furniture and rattan used indoors and outdoors.

Palmer wants people who come to The Gardening Circle to experience the store with all five senses. "It's about slowing down, escaping that frenetic pace and creating tranquil spaces," Palmer said.

She also wants to keep items affordable and sells many things for under \$10. There is an expectation that prices are low, Palmer said. This makes selling locally made products difficult, but she said she still tries to sell as much local ware as possible.

During the summer months, Palmer is extending her hours on Thursday and Friday evenings till 8pm, as more pedestrians stroll the streets of Fort Langley. She has found that her new location actually has more pedestrian traffic than her Cambie Street location did.

Her customer base is predominately from the Fraser Valley, but tourists drop in, as well as old Cambie Street patrons.



Abby Palmer

Owner, The Gardening Circle



By Maria Rantanen/Langley Advance

Abby Palmer (left) says her job as owner of the Gardening Circle in Fort Langley is to articulate a vision for the store so Carolyn Forsyth (right) and her other employees can work as a team.

*"The face of Fort Langley is changing for the better,"*

Abby Palmer  
Fort Langley BIA president