

MOM-AND-POP HARDWARE STORE THRIVING

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VALLEY SPRINGS - In an age when many mom-and-pop hardware stores have been crushed by competition from big boxes, the Sender family of Mountain Ranch is not just surviving, but thriving.

Sender's Market and Hardware operates in a tiny village with just a few hundred residents almost in the dead center of Calaveras County. Yet the hardware side of the operation has regional reach, regularly delivering lumber and other construction materials to customers in three counties.

And now, in a bid to grab more business away from big box competitors in Jackson, Sonora and the Central Valley, the Sender family is about to expand to a second location in Valley Springs.

Doors opened Tuesday at the new location on Highway 26 at the site of the former Valley Springs Home Center.

Sender's Market ACE Hardware LLC bought the former Valley Springs Home Center property for about \$2.2 million, according to property records. The deal was financed in part with a \$1.1 million loan guaranteed by the federal Small Business Administration.

"We saw a need down here," said Erich Sender, whose parents founded Sender's Market in 1950. "If someone else had bought (the Valley Springs Home Center site), they could have cannibalized us."

For weeks, Sender's employees and workers from ACE Hardware have been revamping the building and stocking it with merchandise. Although not as large as a Lowe's or a Home Depot, the new Sender's Hardware site has enough space to offer amenities that make it competitive, such as a display for the trusses that another Sender family business manufactures and a paint showroom aimed at do-it-yourself customers.

"We are one of the first to have it," store manager Bruce Peddy said of the paint store setup that ACE recently made available to its franchisees.

The Valley Springs location will also have a full-service lumberyard and a wide variety of construction materials, a small garden section and, up front, a kitchen store with high-end cooking gadgets and gifts.

The Valley Springs location will also offer some of the same construction packages that gave the original Mountain Ranch site a competitive edge over less nimble big-box stores: items such as engineered septic systems that meet local standards and garage construction materials and plans that have already been reviewed and approved for use in Calaveras County.

And if someone wants a color of roofing or a type of tool not in stock, Sender's employees will order it.

Allen Sender, 48, the son of Erich and now the leader of the operation, said he expects to employ 25 people at the Valley Springs site.

Valley Springs residents and business owners say they are thrilled to have the Sender family coming to town and that many already have purchased construction materials from the Mountain Ranch business.

"We have a lot of people from Valley Springs that go up to Senders. ... They have a great reputation," said Heather Ugale, the chairwoman of the Valley Springs Area Business Association.

Ugale said she's planning to invite the Senders to an upcoming association meeting so they can get to know Valley Springs business owners.

Coming from an even smaller rural community, Allen Sender said he understands how important such relationships are to the success of his enterprise.

"Our goal is to make a store the community can be proud of," Sender said.

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