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Sunflower plants seed in The Village retail center

Discount natural retailer to take over movie theater space near McGuckin

By Alicia Wallace and Greg Avery, Camera Business Writers

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Discount natural retailer Sunflower Farmers Market plans to make its Boulder debut next year with a store in the space now occupied by United Artists Theater near McGuckin Hardware.

The arrival, which brings a natural foods veteran back to his old stomping ground, not only adds another competitor to a grocer-filled central corridor, but it also means the subtraction of a Boulder box office.

The 25,000-square-foot Sunflower Farmers Market will take most of the space filled by the four-screen United Artist's movie theaters as well as two shop spaces on the west-facing side of The Village Shopping Center at Arapahoe. The theater will close at the end of this year, said Gart Properties LLC, which owns the center.

Mike Gilliland, a co-founder of the Boulder-based Newflower Market that operates 11 Sunflower stores, also co-founded Wild Oats Markets Inc. and lives near the new shop's location.

"Personally, I'm looking forward to having a store in my backyard," he said.

Gilliland co-founded Wild Oats here in 1987 with Libby Cook. The two also have been involved with the formation of other small markets, including Lolita's, which still operates at 800 Pearl St. Gilliland and Cook severed their remaining ties with Wild Oats in 2001.

The Boulder Sunflower most will likely open after the first quarter of next year, said Bennett Bertoli, Newflower's vice president of real estate. A central location in a city well-versed in natural and organic products should prove successful, Bertoli said.

"We're pretty confident that Boulder is going to take to this concept," Bertoli said. "The Boulder people are going to be surprised at the pricing."

Because the company self-distributes, it's able to offer natural and organic products at lower prices, he said.

When Sunflower opens, it will have a Safeway, a flagship Wild Oats location, a King Soopers, a Vitamin Cottage and a Whole Foods within a one-mile radius.

But that doesn't necessarily mean the market's oversaturated, said Wild Oats spokeswoman Sonja Tuitele, who noted the maturity of the natural foods industry in Boulder.

Despite the added competition, Tuitele said Wild Oats feels confident in its own success, citing a 40,000-square-foot flagship store scheduled to open in the spring at the Twenty Ninth Street mall and a nearly 20-year history in the area.

A grocery store will help all of The Village's retailers by bringing frequent repeat shopper visits, said Mark Sidell, president of Gart Properties.

Gart Properties plans to talk with the 3 Day Blinds and Aspen Eyewear stores about relocating within The Village to free up as much as 17,000 square feet immediately south of the Sunflower Farmers Market. That space is envisioned as a high-end wine shop, outdoor recreation retailer or some other use that complements the grocery, hardware and other shops.

The timeline suggests Boulder will be down to only one movie theater complex — the six-screen Landmark Crossroads Cinema off Pearl and 30th streets — for at least three months. The 14-screen Century Theatre complex planned at Twenty Ninth Street just east of The Village is expected to open no earlier than April.