

# Starbucks Coming To Town?

Residents have conflicting opinions on potential addition to the Great Falls Village Center.

BY ARANYA TOMSETH  
PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFFREY W. HARRIS

Ever since Gilette's Coffee closed last December, the residents of Great Falls have wondered what would replace the Village Center's only coffee shop. The likely incoming vendor has some jumping for joy, and others shaking their heads in disappointment.

Carl Freeman Associates, the commercial property management company for the Great Falls Village Center, is currently discussing lease terms with Starbucks Coffee.

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# Potential Arrival of Starbucks Divides Community

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haven't signed anything yet," said Michael Reilly, vice president and general manager at Carl Freeman Associates. "But they really want to be there — they've wanted to be in that location for a long time."

The potential arrival of the worldwide commercial coffee chain is not sitting well with local residents who were loyal patrons of the privately owned Gillette's Coffee. Run by husband and wife business partners Buddy and Beth Harris, Gillette's served the Great Falls community for 17 years until Carl Freeman Associates ended its lease with the coffee shop in mid-December, 2006. Buddy and Beth Harris are currently in the midst of legal proceedings with Carl Freeman Associates, and are subsequently unable to disclose the details of their lease termination.

"It's been very hard," said Beth Harris. "We were there for 17 years, and we miss everyone in the community so much... but we're coming back strong with our coffee. We are not completely online yet, but we are up and roasting, and we're getting ready to do an e-mail newsletter."

Long-time supporters of Gillette's were disheartened by the loss of what they deemed an irreplaceable community institution.

When local resident Charles Givans heard that Starbucks might move into the former Gillette's space, he harkened back to a decade earlier when he watched as Starbucks systematically drove the local mom and pop coffee shops out of business in his father's California neighborhood. Givans says that the sad trend of small locally owned businesses being driven out by high rents and the influx of large commercial chains, is one that can be seen throughout the country.

"I think the rent situation is inflated here in Great Falls — you hear about it from most vendors — and I'm so disappointed that Gillette's was pushed out of business as a result," said Givans. "If we are considering another coffee shop, I recommend we shop for options where the provider has a good selection of coffees and fresh-baked, healthier options from which to choose — maybe a JavaWorks or something similar would be interesting if no mom and pop operations can afford to give this a try."

Mary Burnette, a 25-year resident of Great Falls, said that she thinks "it's a sad commentary when only large national chains can afford the rent being charged to businesses in the Village."

**MANY RESIDENTS** agree with Givans and Burnette — not only out of support for Gillette's, but also because of a desire to preserve the rural, small-town character of Great Falls.

"I am definitely not for a Starbucks," said resident and local business owner Valerie Jensen. "It goes against our entire family community mindset here in Great Falls. We strive very hard to keep this a small non-commercial community, and Starbucks is

the complete antithesis of what we have fought so hard to maintain here in Great Falls."

Like Givans, Jensen says that she would like to see a small, family-run entity take over the Gillette's space. In fact, Jensen said she is acquainted with a local family who owns a franchise for Saxby's Coffee, and who was interested in leasing the former Gillette's space. However, Jensen says they were told by Carl Freeman Associates that their bid is not being considered.

"I can't understand why," said Jensen. "Starbucks markets itself to the urban single or yuppie who wants to hang out and check their e-mail over a latte. Gillette's was not that kind of a store — it promoted a meeting place for the community to converse and network, not to settle back into a chair and immerse one's self in e-mail — or worse — serve as a hang-out for the teens who are not old enough to go to clubs."

Local resident and Great Falls Citizens Association (GFCA) Executive Board member Jack Bowles would also like to see a small mom and pop business become the new community coffee shop.

"Starbucks would not be my first — or 10th — choice," said Bowles.

Some residents are also concerned that, unlike Gillette's, Starbucks will not be as intrinsically involved in local community issues and events. Local resident Walt Lawrence said that he doubts that Starbucks will follow in Gillette's footsteps and provide free coffee at the Great Falls Library every Saturday morning.

"We don't need more faceless, national operations in the village who have no ties to the community," said Lawrence. "How many flyers, brochures and handouts do you think Starbucks will allow to be placed in their shop or on their store windows? Probably about the same number as Calico Corners, another national chain — zero."

Lawrence says that he believes that a community's vitality depends on the success of its local businesses. "We as citizens of Great Falls have an obligation to support our local businesses, or they will fail," said Lawrence. "And when they fail, we all lose."

**NOT EVERYONE** equates the arrival of Starbucks with the demise of the small town, family community mindset. In fact, many residents say that they believe a Starbucks Coffee will provide precisely the community gathering place that the Village Center was missing. Andrew Creighton said that he and his wife "enthusiastically support" the idea of bringing Starbucks to Great Falls.

"The consistently high quality of their product line is one benefit, but more importantly, it would add another social space to the Great Falls village — something which it needs very much," said Creighton. "The Tavern and the Brogue are wonderful, but Starbucks would be a smoke-free place, where a cup of joe and a newspaper go down very nicely together."

Proponents of Starbucks also say that it



PHOTO BY ANNA JENSEN FOR THE CONNECTION

**Starbucks Coffee may soon take over the Great Falls Village Center space that was previously occupied by Gillette's Coffee.**

will help, not hinder, the local business economy. Sandy Rubin, owner of Sandy Alison Diamonds & Fine Jewelry in the Great Falls Village Center, said that she has seen first-hand, the benefits of being located near a Starbucks Coffee.

"While I liked the people, and purchased coffee from Gillette's every morning, I am a big fan of Starbucks," said Rubin. "There was a Starbucks in the previous shopping center that we owned a jewelry store in, and it was a big plus for the center. It brought traffic to the center, and attracted better stores to fill the vacancies ... I can't see a downside to having Starbucks lease that space — I think the shopping center would benefit, as well as the community they would be serving."

LeeAnn Dance is ecstatic at the prospect of Starbucks opening in the Village Center. Many years ago, she and her husband had looked into opening a Starbucks franchise in Great Falls, but were disappointed to find out that it is not a franchise operation. Dance said that she and her husband visit Starbucks almost daily — sometimes several times a day between the two of them.

"We've driven to Starbucks in Cascades because it's open until 10:30 p.m., and we can grab a late night drink together and talk," said Dance. "If one opened here, I'd buy my own permanent seat. A comfortable place to meet and have coffee with friends would be so welcome here."

Dance said she is well aware that "there are preservationists who don't want a Starbucks in town," but she simply does not see eye to eye with opponents of the chain.

"We've already got an Arby's and a 7-Eleven — Starbucks would be an improvement," she said.

Local resident Shelley Lucas, who says she would "go out of my mind with happiness if a Starbucks were to open in the Great Falls Village Center," is also dismissive of

such critics.

"Yes, yes, I know — Great Falls is too snooty for a common chain retailer like Starbucks," said Lucas. "Well, half of the folks at every community event ... are clutching that distinctive Starbucks cup — they just went further to get it."

Resident Gina Ryan, a self-described "coffee lover with kids, and who loves to read," said that she would love to have a Starbucks down the street from where she lives.

"Cozy seats, great coffee, good food, convenient hours — it would be a nice change," said Ryan.

Ryan is not the only mom in favor of the chain. Danielle Saunders, a working mother of three, says that she would love to have a local Starbucks to serve as a pit-stop as she drives from one soccer game to another, and Ramona Rishi said her children would love to have the option of meeting up with friends at a Village Center Starbucks — as opposed to trekking out to the Tysons Corner locations.

Many local youths are also proponents of adding a Starbucks to the Great Falls Village Center. Elizabeth Maloney, a 2006 graduate of Langley High School who currently attends Radford University, said she thinks a Starbucks will draw more customers into other stores in the town center.

"Also, for everyday commuters, a Starbucks would be convenient as they head off to work," said Maloney. "Many that I have talked to over the years have wanted a Starbucks in Great Falls. Enough — I say go for it."

**THE GREAT FALLS** community has historically spurned large international chains. Several years ago, McDonalds attempted to open a location in Great Falls, but fierce community opposition and the fast food chain's unwillingness to comply with the muted brick Village Center architecture and low light pollution standards, squashed the effort.

Whether or not Starbucks Coffee will take over the space formerly occupied by Gillette's Coffee, remains to be seen. Nothing is certain until the international coffee chain signs an official lease agreement with Carl Freeman Associates. However, Reilly says that Carl Freeman Associates is optimistic about the outcome of its current lease discussions with Starbucks. Should the lease negotiation with Starbucks unexpectedly fall through, Carl Freeman Associates will seek another coffee shop vendor.

"We're hoping that things work out with them [Starbucks], but yes, our preference would be to get another coffee shop in the location because we think it's one of those critical uses from a community focal point," said Reilly. "It's something that needs to be there."

Reilly is also confident that the majority of the Great Falls community will ultimately embrace the addition of a Starbucks Coffee to the Village Center.

"I think once they're in there, people will be happy," said Reilly.