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Journal photo by Tom Mullen

Kathy Geist, owner of downtown business Better on You, said last week's layoff announcement by Simpson Lumber Co. fuels what she calls a misperception that Shelton is not a good place to work and live.

Former Simpson worker: 'Businesses are still here' for laid-off workers

By TOM MULLEN
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The sale of Simpson Lumber Co. has Kathy Geist worried.

"It's not that we don't have people in our community that need our help. We do. But there is this perception, and it is not coming from the people who live here, but we don't have a zombie apocalypse of homeless people accosting people downtown," she said.

Geist owns and operates the clothing store and artist cooperative Better on You in downtown Shelton, and told the *Mason County Journal* that while she sees the sale of the city's longtime Leviathan as troublesome, there is light at the end of the tunnel.

"I lived here through the 1980s when 800 people lost their jobs and the people that this is happening to, they need to reach out," she said. "They need to know that businesses are here for them and that Simpson will be here to help them and that there are friends here to help. This is the sort of thing that has been trickling down for a long time."

Geist was born in Springfield, Oregon, the daughter of a Gypsy logger. Her dad eventually took a job at Simpson, as did she, right out of high school.

After five years with Simpson, she decided to go to school at The Evergreen State College in Olympia where she developed a love for retail, she said, and went back to working for Simpson while her husband worked swing shift there.

"But I loved working with people and so I went to work on code enforcement for the city of Shelton and I loved that work," she recalled.

But when the economy crashed in 2008, the building soon stopped and

Geist was, to use her word, "riffed."
"I lost my job after 19 years at the city. It was devastating. I was so mad," she said.

She eventually found part-time work with the Port of Olympia and when Mason Transit Authority's new Transit-Community Center was built, she applied for and received the job of directing the new center. Her bounce back, she said, was a long and difficult process, and she wants displaced Simpson workers to know that there are people in the community who have been in similar circumstances and that perhaps there are hard lessons they need not relearn.

"Don't dwell on it," she advises. "It happened and you can't change it. Mourn it but don't let it stop you. Start looking for jobs right now."

She noted that people commuting to and from Shelton for work is nothing new, and that when Sierra Pacific, the company that purchased Simpson's assets, is finished building a new mill at the waterfront, things will be better.

"The property tax at the waterfront could be greatly enhanced. The stars are aligned. But right now our No. 1 priority has to be helping those families to move on," she said. "But then look at the future. We are a tough and resilient and wise community and that's where we need to concentrate."

Economic indicators for the county are good, Geist noted, and pointed to the Transit Authority's budget, which relies on sales tax receipts.

According to sales tax receipts, Mason County revenue has been climbing, often double digits (on a month-to-month basis when compared to the same month the prior year) and have been every month since May 2013.