

Business profileThe YMCA's new leader: **A28** ▶

BUSINESS PLANS

On the movePromotions, new hires and awards. **A30 & 31** ▶

A GUIDE TO THE GREATER FORT MYERS BUSINESS INDUSTRY

Internet helps local Swedish business take off

A Swedish Affair has been a Fort Myers icon for 23 years

BY MICHELLE L. START

Florida Weekly Correspondent

Visitors from around the world have been stopping by A Swedish Affair in Royal Palm Square since the shop opened 23 years ago. But since launching an online shopping cart, the small Fort Myers based business has seen a boom that now accounts for a third of all its sales.

"It allows us to grow. I sell all over the world," said Richard Warren, who owns the shop along with his Swedish wife, Yvonne. "It's not just a shop in Royal Palm Square now. It is a worldwide business. It's something a bricks and mortar building cannot always do. The internet has pretty much saved us."

During the past two weeks, some 900 people have visited the Web site, with the

During the past two weeks, some 900 people have visited the Web site, with the vast majority being new visitors.

vast majority being new visitors. Most hailed from the Americas, but 212 lived in Europe, 22 in Asia, 11 in Oceania and two in Africa, according to statistics logged by Google Analytics.

Warren said customers shop his store online because it is less expensive than having items shipped from Scandinavian countries and because he can generally supply fresher food products to those in the Americas.

At about 10 cents a click, Warren said selling his wares on the internet is cost effective.

When the couple first opened their shop, which sells Scandinavian novelties, the plaza saw retail traffic while it now houses mostly businesses. The change over the years has translated into fewer customers in the store.

During season, Warren said his wife can box up some 36 internet orders in a day in



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO
Bonnie Camp and Judy Kinsinger laugh over cards at A Swedish Affair.

addition to the regular traffic that comes into the store. Additionally, Warren said the store sees many of the same seasonal residents year after year, particularly since so many mid-Westerners that call Fort Myers home during the winter months are of Scandinavian descent.

Sarah Valencia, 67, and Barbara Colacurcio, 75, were vacationing in Fort Myers last week when they stopped in the store.

"It's wonderful. I am so excited to be here," said Valencia. "This is the nicest Scandinavian store that I have ever been in. I'm Swedish and this is just beautiful."

Warren stocks the store with novelty



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO
Sarah Valencia is Swedish and decided to stop in the shop after seeing an advertisement for it in a tourism magazine.

items that are hard to find elsewhere. Each year, the couple travel to Atlanta for a trade show that features some 7,000 vendors. They also travel back to Sweden every year, where they own a house.

"We go and look for new things," Warren said. "This is a niche market. We deliberately try to pick things the mainstream stores don't pick, like the horses, crystal and Norwegian flatware. You won't see Pier I or World Market carrying stuff like that."

About 85 percent of the items sold in the shop are Scandinavian while another 15 percent is American but not sold extensively elsewhere.

Fort Myers resident Judy Kinsinger, 58, has been a customer for some time, but recently brought in her friend, Bonnie Camp, 63, also of Fort Myers to see the different items sold at A Swedish Affair.

"I have been here before and I like it," said Kinsinger. "Some days we just go out and do stuff like this. We don't have an agenda."

Warren dreams of expanding the business and opening a Scandinavian bakery.

"I would love to do a Scandinavian bakery and coffee shop but that would take a lot of money," Warren said. "That's just a dream. My main emphasis right now is expanding on the internet." ■

Commercial permits set record

Housing permits up in June over last year

SPECIAL TO FLORIDA WEEKLY

Commercial building permits issued for Lee County, Bonita Springs and Fort Myers Beach hit an all-time monthly high of \$332.9 million in June, due primarily to a rush to beat a June 29 deadline to qualify for lower road impact fees.

The previous monthly high of \$113 million, which included permitting for the Midfield Terminal at Southwest Florida International Airport, was set in January 2003.

The June figure represents 72 percent of the value of all commercial permits issued by Lee County Community Development so far this year. It includes permitting for an \$18.2 million Target at 15890 San Carlos Blvd. and a \$16 million, six-story executive office building at 23300 Walden Court, designed to be used as a headquarters for WCI.

Builders also picked up 449 permits for single-family houses, up 48 percent over May. June's single-family residential construction is valued at \$120.3 million, up 35 percent over May. When compared to 2006, June's single-

family permit number is down 40 percent and the value is down 44 percent.

About 65 percent of the single-family home permits were for construction in Lehigh Acres.

Also in June, permits were issued for 332 multi-family units with a combined value of \$51.9 million. That's triple the number of units permitted in May. Compared to June 2006, it's up 10 units, or 3 percent.

In the first half of this year, Lee County issued a total of 17,718 building permits of all kinds, valued at approximately \$1.7 billion. At this time last year, the county had issued 25,014 building permits valued at approximately \$2.3 billion.

Lee County Community Development oversees planning, zoning, and development services, such as permitting, development and environmental review, building inspection and code enforcement in the unincorporated areas of the county, and permitting services for Bonita Springs and Fort Myers Beach. To learn more about the department and its services, visit <http://www.lee-county.com/dcd>. ■



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO
Commercial building permits issued for Lee County hit an all-time monthly high in June.