

Author cautions group to keep up with the times, demands

By KAREN WILKINSON *staff writer*

Author Jack Schultz said he couldn't find a coffee shop with a newspaper stand Monday morning as he made his way through downtown Ellensburg. He also said he noticed about a dozen vacant lots while on his walk.

Schultz, who lives in a city of 12,000 in southern Illinois named Effingham, said in order for downtown areas and businesses to thrive, they must keep up with consumers' ever-changing needs. Ellensburg is a city with about 16,000 people.

At an invitation only lunch Monday afternoon Schultz addressed members of the Economic Development Group of Kittitas County and various community leaders as to how Ellensburg could accommodate its small but growing population. Schultz, who just more than a year ago published "Boomtown USA: The 7 1/2 Keys to Big Success in Small Towns," also answered questions about the pros and cons of allowing a big box store move in.

"It really seems like we hit a nerve," said Schultz, referring to the subject matter he wrote about. "There really are big things happening in small towns across the country."

He said cities that choose to block big boxes end up paying more in the long run because people travel outside the community for cheaper prices. "It's really a losers' game to be only a bedroom community," Schultz said. "You've got a lot of leakage going out of the community."

He said if Ellensburg were to rezone land and allow for a big box along the outskirts of town, the downtown area would need to recreate itself as a meeting area to survive. Ways of doing so include remodeling buildings' upstairs units and renting them out to students, adding restaurants and redirecting downtown businesses to meet entertainment needs more so than retail.

However, Schultz said he hasn't studied the effects a business, such as Wal-Mart, has left upon the downtown areas of cities of similar size to Ellensburg, when pressed during a question-and answer period. He did say, however, that independently owned stores carry different products than a chain store and maintain a higher level of service.

Schultz also touched on the benefits of attracting industrial businesses from Seattle. He said when businesses are looking to expand or relocate, more often than not they look toward the "easy" cities to do so, which have a history of dealing with industrial businesses.

"It's kind of follow-the leader mentality that take place in that game," he said "You've got to be ahead of that game".

Economic Development Group, Executive Director Debbie Strand, said much of what Schultz said is what her organization already is aware of.

"But it's nice to have someone from outside the area to reinforce you ideas," she said. "I though he did a good job for only being here overnight."