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Rivals: Bass Pro incentives aren't sportsmanlike

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VALPARAISO | At Doris Salada's small Country Bait Shop, crickets are a delicacy.

Customer Traci Henson, of Hebron, drives about 15 miles out of her way for the 10-cent critters. Her son's leopard gecko loves them, and they're bigger and more affordable than those sold at other shops, she said.

So when Bass Pro Shops comes to the area, Henson said she still will make the 20-minute trek to Salada's store to make sure the lizard gets fed.

Salada is the owner of one of a few local bait and tackle specialty shops that could end up competing for customers with Bass Pro when it comes to Portage this fall.

Salada said she is not concerned about losing her regular customers, because she sells items in her petite, tackle-lined shop that Bass Pro probably won't. And if it's not in stock, she'll hunt it down for her clients.

"They know I'll look and try to find what they want," she said. "I treat my customers right."

Tucked behind a gas station on the edge of an unpaved, rock-covered driveway, the store's unassuming wooden fish sign tells visitors when it's open. When her husband died in 1999, Salada became the sole proprietor of the store they'd owned since 1982.

Paired with a loyal customer base and the convenience of being less than a mile from four fishing lakes, Salada thinks she still will be in business after Bass Pro opens in November.

But not everyone shares her confidence.

A Portage merchant, whom The Times chose not to identify, said the megastore's arrival is "definitely going to make an impact" on smaller shops.

"I'm leery of people who come in and suck the money out of our area and send it someplace else," she said.

She said competition - especially coming from a visible, national brand - isn't bad, but "favoring with money" is not fair to "the little guy."

An employee of Range Master Outfitters in nearby Chesterton said the store would not comment on a competitor.

The merchant said smaller stores like Salada's offer a level of familiarity and personal expertise that customers might not get at larger chains like Bass Pro.

"Bigger is not necessarily better," she said.

In her reel and net-filled store, Salada bagged Henson's crickets and encouraged her to try a new candle that just came in. Sure, two-year customer Henson could write a check for the purchases, Salada said.

Before her husband died, Salada used to be a worrier, she said. Back then, she might have been more nervous about Bass Pro. But now, "I don't worry about tomorrow."

"You can't fight city hall," she said. "You can't fight big business."

[EXTRAS]

Construction for a Bass Pro Shops megastore in Portage is scheduled for April, with completion in November. The project is expected to create 650 construction jobs and another 320 jobs when the store opens. The store has received \$17.5 million in city and \$2.5 million in state development incentives.