



Mary Chapman at her Silver Cross health-supply shop.

STAFF PHOTO BY DENIS CAHILL

When more traffic isn't a problem

By **MONIQUE BEECH**
Standard Staff

Tucked away in a nondescript strip mall on an industrial road, there's a small shop where the Chapmans are building their family fortune.

For 10 years, Mary and Tom have run Silver Cross, a franchise on Vansickle Road that sells new and recycled stair and porch lifts and scooters.

With son Patrick, 25, working sales, the couple has grown their health equipment business by helping ease the lives of the disabled and elderly.

They've also had a bit of unexpected help from the urban planning gods.

In recent years, Fourth Avenue has

blossomed into a big-box bonanza, with retail heavyweights like Wal-Mart and the Real Canadian Superstore opening and driving traffic down Vansickle.

In three years, the Chapmans will have more heavyweight neighbours. The new St. Catharines hospital complex — slated to open in 2011 — is expected to create 233 full-time jobs with its new cancer clinic, mental-health beds and cardiac catheterization units. The associated salary and benefits related to those new jobs are forecasted to exceed \$20 million.

There's plenty of other businesses to be born out of the new hospital.

A 44-acre plot of land off Fourth Avenue, next to the hospital site, is earmarked for medical clinics, drugstores, fitness centres, day cares and pharmaceutical firms.

Health and wellness could be a key pillar in Niagara's economic future, local leaders say.

Debbie Sevenpifer, chief executive officer of the Niagara Health System, calls the hospital plans a "catalyst for economic growth."

That's great news for small businesses like Silver Cross.

The big-box stores have already driven walk-in traffic, Chapman said.

"I think the same thing is going to happen when people are going back and forth to the hospital and they're needing equipment and we're right around the corner. It's inevitable (the customers) are going to be here.

"It's something to look forward to. I just wish it wasn't taking so long."

There's more driving the local health and wellness economy.

Niagara has one of the oldest populations in Canada.

Those aged 65 and older make up 17.7 per cent of Niagara's population, according to 2006 census data released by Statistics Canada. The area ranks fourth in the country among urban regions with the highest proportion of seniors.

That means more retirement homes, personal support workers, occupational health workers, physiotherapists and health-care products for seniors will be needed in the future.

Mary Chapman already sees it. More of her senior clients are trying to hang on to their independence and remain in their own homes for as long as possible. That sometimes requires a scooter or a stair lift.

"They don't want to have to go into a retirement home," said Chapman, 56. "They don't want to go to a nursing home as long as they can live in their own home safely."

Helping others is what attracted Mary, a former sales rep for an ergonomics company, and Tom, a former property-tax consultant, to health-care products.

And the future is bright.

"I see growth," Mary said of the family company.