

Herald Sun

Tough times in Sydenham-Hillside

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Helal Latife, owner of Hillside convenience store.

Source: HWT Image Library

AFTER four years running his own suburban milk bar, Helal Latife reckons this year has been his toughest - with little sign of improvement in the near future.

Mr Latife says the combination of soaring electricity prices and a big rise in the tax take on cigarettes has smashed his turnover and profits - and conversations with his customers convinces him that it's just not him who is suffering.

"Everyone is struggling," he said. "People are finding they have to live tighter. They're watching their dollar more."

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He said his quarterly power bill had risen from \$1500 to \$3000 in just four years.

"That's an extra \$500 a month I have to come up with. What am I supposed to do? I can't put my prices up. I'm looking for lights I can switch off and turning off the cold room for a few hours at night, looking for any way to cut the power bills. I've never had to do that before."

Even worse than the relentless rise in utility price rises, though, was a big fall in cigarette sales after the Federal Government's 25 per cent tax rise on cigarettes in April. Laws banning the display of cigarettes in shops from January would cause further pain.

"In milk bars and convenience stores, cigarettes make up 40 per cent of sales," Mr Latife said. "If we don't sell them, we're not in business."

"It's not fair. If they're going to put up the taxes, they should give something back to us - even 10c or 20c a packet is better than nothing."

"Whatever cigarettes are doing to the smokers has been done. But putting up the prices like that is just hurting everyone else."

Mr Latife has spent most of his working life in retail, helping his father in supermarkets, before buying the business at the age of 24. And he said small business had been much more financially rewarding under the Howard government.

"They were the best times," he said. "These days it's hard. It's just frustrating. I'm trying to make an honest living, making a success of my life, but it's like the Government is pushing people to not succeed. You understand why some people start getting shiftier just to survive."

He said he saw 200 customers a day, with a broad spread of occupations including doctors and police and gained a good understanding of people's lives.

"Everyone's got problems with power and water bills," he said.

"If any political party showed how they could cut the bills, they'd win an election easily."

KRISTINE GALEA: *Better freeway access is overdue*

A GROWING population in Sydenham and Hillside has not been matched with improved road infrastructure, says Kristine Galea.

Her family's home was one of the first in her part of Catherine Drive, being built in the earliest days of the suburb of Hillside. Empty paddocks that once surrounded her home are now filled with new homes.

She said though a Kings Rd interchange was being built at the Calder Freeway, drivers going to the city would still be forced to use Melton Highway, which was heavily congested past Watergardens shopping centre.

Ms Galea said the State Government should widen Calder Park Drive and provide an on-ramp at the freeway for traffic heading towards the city.

She said Hillside was full of young families, but needed better cycling tracks and improved parking at Parkwood Green Primary School. With more than 1000 pupils at the school, parking was a "nightmare" and parents who pulled up on the nature strip were fined.

"They're supposed to be putting in some indented parking spaces, but it's strange they never thought of it in the first place," she said.

JASVINDER SINGH: *Tram driver who finds traffic congestion problem is worsening*

TO passengers on the tram services that run from the Essendon depot, Jasvinder Singh's face may be familiar - he has been driving the trams for 12 years after migrating from India.

He has seen his street become much busier since moving in as housing construction spreads across Sydenham and Hillside, but that is nothing compared with the increased traffic density on the roads he negotiates every day on his tram routes.

"Between 1998 and today, the traffic is 10 times worse," he said. "There are also far more traffic lights to stop at."

He said he understood the tension that often existed between trams and motor traffic and often shook his head at driver behaviour. But he said he did not take it personally.

"There are often people from out of town or interstate who don't know what they're doing on the road," he said. "If I see people making silly mistakes I just go on and keep going."

But when off duty and in his car, he still regarded trams as an obstacle on the road.

"When I'm in my car I think like a car driver," he said. "Like everyone else, I just want to get ahead of the tram."

MICHELLE FREND: *Enjoying open space, but not hooners, after so long in a St Kilda flat*

AFTER enduring life in a one-bedroom St Kilda flat with shared laundry facilities, former high school teacher Michelle Frendo and her husband were glad to move into their Hillside home with its generous back yard.

The couple considered Caroline Springs, but decided they wanted a suburb with bigger blocks of land and greater

space between neighbours.

But she prefers to shop in Caroline Springs rather than Watergardens and says their swim centre also is superior to the dated facilities in Sydenham.

The municipal boundary between Brimbank and Melton occurs part way along Catherine Drive.

"You can see where, because the trees on the nature strip suddenly change," she said, but there were other differences as well: rates on the Melton side of the municipal boundary were "ridiculously high", and while the Brimbank side had frequent hard rubbish collections, her side had none.

The couple live on a sweeping bend in Catherine Drive and her concerns about reckless young speeding drivers, particularly those who speed in wet weather, prompts her to park the family car in their driveway rather than the garage.

"I really worry when they drive like that," Mrs Frendo said. "If they lose control, I'd rather they hit the car than ended up in the house," she said.

"It gives us a bit more protection."

RUSSELL: *Suburb's needs change as its population ages*

IT SEEMS like a different age when Russell and his family moved into Sydenham in 1993.

"There was nothing here," he said. "We had country trains, no Watergardens, no Bunnings. It's much better now."

Russell, who works in the justice system and does not want his surname used, said the area had also shaken off its problems with youth gangs and unrest.

"When we moved in, my kids were teenagers and there were a lot of other teens around," he said.

"I guess over time they've grown up or moved out - gone to Caroline Springs, probably! In the past four or five years it has definitely improved."

He said that as the area's population aged, different needs arose.

"It needs more community things. The council has put in a library, but with all the pensioners around, we need a Medicare office."

He said an ageing population had also created a demand for an outlet of a discount pharmacy chain. "It would do huge business here," he said.

PAMELA CHONDROS: *Council needs to upgrade playgrounds*

PAMELA Chondros moved to Sydenham from Doncaster four years ago to be closer to family.

It is a family-oriented area, she says, close to CityLink and Watergardens shopping centre. But with two active preschool-aged boys, she feels disappointed Brimbank City Council has failed to maintain the standard of local playgrounds.

"We need better parks," she said. "They're pretty run down and need updating."

Mrs Chondros said she also had concerns about schooling in the western suburbs.

She had heard media reports of fighting in primary and secondary schools, but was also worried that children who attended schools in the west would find it harder to find good jobs.

"Some schools have good names, but from what I have heard the schools out this way don't have such a good name," she said.

"The problem is when kids are looking for work and have to say they've been to those schools," she said.

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