

NEWSBITES

LOS ANGELES — Southern California grocery workers on Sunday voted to authorize a strike against Albertsons if a new union contract can't be worked out. The vote gives the grocery chain and the United Food and Commercial Workers union until April 13 to work out a new deal.

HOUSTON — My Healthy Access, the clinic operating company of Intrepid Holdings, plans to open a clinic in a Frederick, Md., Wal-Mart supercenter on April 16. The clinic will be the company's seventh, and its first located in the Mid-Atlantic area.

NEWARK, N.J. — Harmony Pharmacy opened its doors at Newark Liberty International Airport, one of three airports serving New York. Located in Terminal C, the pharmacy not only will dispense travelers' prescriptions, but also will provide an on-site nurse practitioner. In addition, it will offer a broad array of preventive assistance and screening services, such as flu shots, vaccinations and examinations.

CINCINNATI — Pharmacy Over-the-Rhine, a not-for-profit pharmacy, opened its doors in the Crossroad Health Center here in January, according to reports. Last year, the health clinic's staff and a local pharmacist envisioned an on-site pharmacy that could serve people with or without health insurance in the poor Cincinnati neighborhood of Over-the-Rhine. Dispensing fees can be as little as \$1 to \$2.

Earnings jump for Walgreens in second quarter

DEERFIELD, Ill. — Strong front-end holiday sales, a firming up of gross profit margins and better control over operating-expense ratios gave Walgreen Co. another solid earnings gain in the second quarter ended Feb. 28, with sales also extending the company's long streak of record results in convincing fashion.

Net earnings for the quarter jumped 24.5 percent over the same period last year, to \$652 million. Net income for the first half of fiscal 2007 rose 24.7 percent to \$1.08 billion.

Sales increased 14.6 percent to a record \$13.9 billion for the second quarter and 15.5 percent to \$26.6 billion for the first half. Comp-store sales were up 8.9 percent in the quarter,

fueled in part by a healthy 5.7 percent rise in front-end comp-store revenues.

Prescription sales, as expected, continue to do the heavy lifting for Walgreens. Script revenues rose 16.4 percent from the year-ago period, or 10.9 percent on a same-store basis, while the number of prescriptions filled in stores open more than a year increased 6.3 percent. Prescriptions accounted for 62.4 percent of sales in the quarter, Walgreens reported.

In another sign of the chain's apparently unstoppable momentum, Walgreens recently announced a new stock repurchase program of up to \$1 billion, which the company plans to execute over the next four years.

FDA recommends increase in user fees

WASHINGTON — The Food and Drug Administration has submitted a final plan to Congress for reauthorizing the Prescription Drug User Fee Act that would significantly boost the user fees charged to drug manufacturers seeking review and approval of their products, and create a new voluntary program to review those manufacturers' direct-to-consumer television advertisements. The current user fee program is scheduled to expire on Sept. 30 and must be reauthorized by Congress every five years.

Key goals for PDUFA IV include placing the user-fee program on a sound financial footing, enhancing the agency's ability to do pre-market

reviews and creating "a modern post-market drug safety system that follows products across their full life cycle," the agency reported.

In pursuit of that goal, the FDA is recommending an \$87.4 million increase in annual user fees, to \$392.8 million, much of it to fund the creation of 84 new staff positions at the agency for pre- and post-market drug review. PDUFA IV also includes a plan to allocate \$6.25 million in new user fees for a voluntary program to review direct-to-consumer TV advertisements for "accuracy and balance prior to airing."

"This new program would support 27 additional staff and would be phased in over five years," the agency noted.

House bill would toughen FDA drug safety procedures

WASHINGTON — Reps. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., and Edward Markey, D-Mass., are promoting their version of the Enhancing Drug Safety and Innovation Act, or H.R.1561, as tougher and more far-reaching than the Senate proposal floated under the same name last September by Sens. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., and Mike Enzi, R-Wyo.

Waxman said the House bill would expand the FDA's arsenal of enforcement and oversight tools to improve drug safety. Among other provisions, it would give the agency greater authority to monitor and assure the safety of post-approval drugs already on the market, in part by

requiring a second review of drug products after they've been on the market for seven years.

Both bills require an initial post-market review after new drugs have been on the market for three years, but Waxman and Markey contend that many side effects don't show up until after that three-year period. According to a report in *FDANews.com*, the House bill also would extend the proposed FDA ban on direct-to-consumer advertising for new drugs to as much as three years following approval. It also would increase the amount of monetary fines the FDA can impose on drug companies that do not comply with requirements, to a minimum of \$50,000.