

Business Downtown Is Better Than You Think

Neal Coonerty

Twenty years ago, Pacific Avenue in downtown Santa Cruz was a sad sight. Dozens of storefronts had been empty for years. Many other storefronts were filled with services, real estate and insurance offices, because low demand created office-like cheap rents. The sidewalks were empty and the buildings looked worn-out. It was just another small town main street which had hit rock bottom.

Twenty years later, the Pacific Garden Mall is a strong, stable and growing retail marketplace as well as the heart of our community. Our downtown has successfully recreated itself into a busy retail center which now attracts national chains and international visitors. Storefronts rent out at the premium prices usually reserved for new construction. Shoppers enjoy outdoor cafés, interesting shops, and buildings which display our community's architectural heritage.

During those 20 years, downtown Santa Cruz has succeeded against all odds. Downtown business districts nationwide haven't been able to compete with suburban indoor malls. Meanwhile, the Pacific Garden Mall has beaten back challenges from the original Capitola Mall, shopping centers in Scotts Valley and Watsonville, the massive new Valley Fair Mall over the hill, and now, the expanded Capitola Mall, proud home to the county's first escalator. Our downtown has succeeded because of the hard work and imagination of its merchants. At the same time, its sales-tax contributions have given millions in critical financial support to our city.

And yet, downtown Santa Cruz has become the most maligned piece of real estate in the county. Sure, downtown has its problems, but newspaper reports make you think that a stroll on the mall is just not for the faint of heart. For 15 years downtown has been a target, a political football, and a guaranteed negative headline for a willing opportunist. Lately, the trashing of downtown has reached an overwhelming cacophony based on little but hollow rhetoric.

The latest attack on downtown came as a complete surprise to the merchants on the mall. The president of the chamber of commerce was twice on the front page of the *Sentinel* declaring that downtown has "gone to hell" and that "people are not shopping downtown anymore."

This chamber campaign is odd because a small town chamber of commerce is usually known to espouse a mindless boosterism reminiscent of a George F. Babbitt. A chamber exists to promote local

business and its most controversial statements normally run the gamut from "Business is great" to "What's good for business is good for the city." This attack is also odd because downtown is doing well in meeting its competitors' latest challenges, preparing to celebrate its 20th anniversary and, with help and money from the city council, it is scheduled for a renovation so it can meet the challenges of the next 20 years. The chamber's attack wasn't the first, but it hurts the most. As a downtown merchant, I resigned my membership in protest.

The chamber's motivation is unclear. Its president's initial column blasted the progressive city council for problems downtown. Since we are in the midst of a recall, a political motive seemed logical but has been denied. Another reason may be an attempt by the chamber to "rattle their cage" by publicly exaggerating downtown problems to get the city council to take action. This is a tactic which is occasionally tried and always fails.

Fifteen years ago, downtown merchants collected thousands of signatures on a petition complaining about downtown. They presented it to the then-conservative city council asking them to get off their duff and help. The merchants were dismayed when this backfired and all they got for their efforts was a heap of bad publicity.

In an effort to avoid being labeled the downtown Pollyanna, let me comment on *the* problem downtown: the street people. The main street of a town is considered by the community as neutral territory—everyone uses it but no one owns it. When a group of people, whether it is street people or the Cabrillo College football team, takes over a part of that territory for their own, then people feel uneasy. When that group is primarily made up of scruffy young males, many with mental or substance-abuse problems, then there is a serious problem because shoppers feel intimidated. However, there are no easy solutions given our democratic beliefs. Santa Cruz has tried everything from benign neglect to cops beating heads (all that "solution" got us was a seriously damaged police department which took years to heal). Merchants and the community have to understand that the city is not withholding some magic cure for this problem. It is a problem which will take imagination, perseverance and, most of all, cooperation to solve.

But, beyond the street people, the evidence of downtown's success is abundant. Sales-tax figures show steady and impressive growth in spite of increased com-

petition. Investment downtown is strong with the McPherson Center for Art & History, the purchase and upgrading of the Cooperhouse, the Pontiac Grill conversion, etc. Finally, outside retail professionals who locate national retail chains have judged downtown a strong retail market by locating such chains as The Gap, Limited Express, Payless Shoes, Athletic X-Press and Gottschalks in our downtown.

As a 20th anniversary gift for the Pacific Garden Mall, I ask for a moratorium on gratuitous attacks on downtown Santa Cruz. We have created an exaggerated cliché about downtown and don't seem to be able to escape this provincial view. It is time to turn down the rhetoric. I ask that politicians, newspaper editors and reporters, the chamber of commerce and the merchants ease up and give downtown a chance.

Neal Coonerty, a downtown business owner for the last 15 years, is a former chair of the Downtown Commission.

The views expressed in this column are those of the writer. Open Forum is designed to provide a platform for community dialogue on issues of general interest, the more controversial the better. THE SUN invites submissions of short essays and polemics for this space.

CHINA'S MOST DAZZLING SPECTACLE!



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