

REPORTS & COMMENTS

Economy

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Boulder Creek

Boulder Creek Rises From Business Slump ...

A FEW short months ago, downtown Boulder Creek was beginning to look more like a dust bowl-era photograph than a picture postcard. Twelve boarded-up storefronts scarred the Highway 9 main drag. Since then, however, the historic district has staged the beginning of a comeback, reducing the number of Central Avenue vacancies to only four.

While Boulder Creek business leaders are pleased with the recent upsurge, they harbor no illusions about the delicate condition of the downtown district, and they are prepared to furnish the constant attention and support it requires to remain viable.

In the wake of last winter's hard times, the Boulder Creek business association began a campaign to

boost the beleaguered downtown: a series of old-fashioned town hall meetings were held to elicit suggestions and drum up support for a renovation project (something like what is going on in San Jose but on a much smaller scale).

Although the results of a survey that was circulated throughout the town were inconclusive, business leaders and citizens alike can all agree on at least a couple of items: That the entire commercial area needs a sharper look and image, and a community center that would serve as a unifying force is needed.

To those ends the business association has applied for \$17,500 of state "Rural Renaissance" funds. When and if it arrives, the money would go toward a consultant to identify other

ways of raising money, downtown beautification measures, and a study of the feasibility of building a community center and performing arts complex in the presently unoccupied Forest Pools complex.

While the ambitious plans for revitalizing downtown Boulder Creek are well taken, everyone is trying to figure out what went wrong in the first place. The large number of business failures that occurred a few months ago (and have traditionally plagued the area) are due to several factors.

One disgruntled faction of the business community claims commercial rent costs are capricious — exorbitant for some, reasonable for others — and that the appearance of Highway 9 has been neglected for years. Owners of thriving businesses, on the

other hand, look outward for the cause.

"Boulder Creek doesn't get nearly as many tourists as it used to because people have bought up most of the old summer vacation retreats and live in them year round now," said Jim Gildner, president of the Boulder Creek business association and owner of a successful print shop called Triple Creek Press.

"The commercialization of Scotts Valley has taken away an awful lot of potential customers. And many of our commuters tend to shop where they work, and by the time they drive back into Boulder Creek, everything is closed," Gildner said.

Terry Albright, owner of Rumpelstiltskin's natural fiber clothing store, says the blight caused by the boarding-up of storefronts belies the fact many Boulder Creek shops are doing quite well.

"I'm not saying there aren't problems, but it's still a matter of perception," remarked Albright, who has doubled his sales in the last two years and is currently expanding his women's clothing department.

"Many of the failed businesses were undercapitalized or didn't merchandise their products very well," Albright said. "Boulder Creek has become an upscale community, and in order to make it you have to cater to a college-educated, fairly affluent clientele. The businesses doing that are successful."

John Reda, owner of Giovanni's Pizza, is among the dissident figures in a splintered business community. After five years in business, Reda has seen enough and is hoping to sell his struggling pizza parlor by the end of this year.

"There are a lot of problems, not the least of which is that I don't think there are enough people in Boulder Creek to support the downtown it has. I'm going to take about a year off and then maybe open up another restaurant in Florida."

There is another element at work in Boulder Creek's tribulation: a sizable number of citizens could care less whether downtown businesses flourish or fold. This segment of the population may be loyal to Boulder Creek as a place to live, but they don't equate the town with the business district. Consequently, they don't feel compelled to shop locally.

One Boulder Creek resident, who wishes to remain anonymous, expressed this sentiment.

"Some of us here don't necessarily want to see a lot of tourists coming through Boulder Creek. Sure I can sympathize with the business owners who have had to shut down, but I don't go out of my way to shop there. I do shop at the natural food store, but that's about it. To be honest, Boulder Creek doesn't have a great selection of shops to choose from."

—Kevin Hanson

... But Saloon Remains on Hit List

'DONT START nuthin' you can't finish,' advises the gun-slinging cartoon cowboy emblazoned across the T-shirts advertising the Boulder Club, the honky-tonk saloon in the false-front Rex Hotel in downtown Boulder Creek.

If the downtown business leaders who want to "clean house" at the Boulder Club are looking for a fight, they'll have no trouble finding one somewhere between the jukebox, the pool tables and the sign behind the bar that reads: "Shirts and shoes required, bras and panties optional."

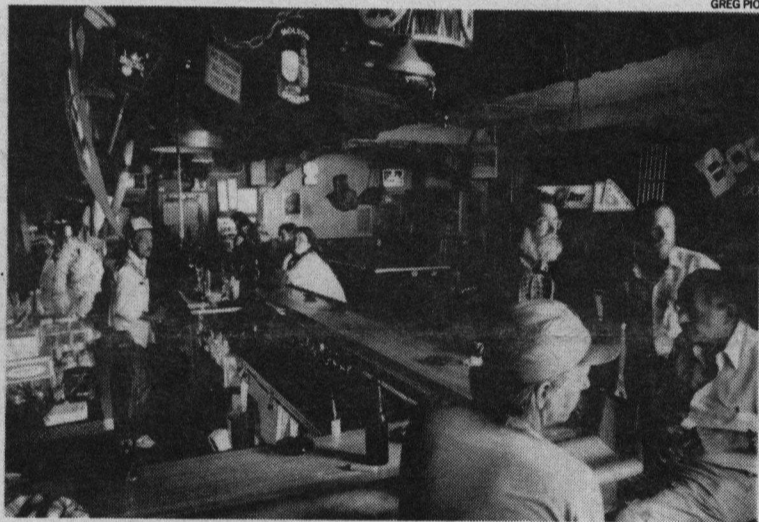
Attitudes such as that — not to mention all those "disgusting, unspeakable acts" in the back of the bar that some residents have reported witnessing (well, the restrooms *are* in the back) — do not amuse business leaders looking for a scapegoat to blame their problems on.

When the local business association mailed out 1,000 surveys to town residents, the "tough biker bar" took top honors as garnering the most complaints, at least in the opinions of the 200 people who returned the flyers.

A meeting of the business association last month to discuss ways to revitalize downtown Boulder Creek's shaky economy became a free-for-all for irate business people to vent their anger about the bar.

It was almost a throwback to 80 years ago, when church deacons declared war on the town's popular saloons and bordellos, which ended in two churches burning to the ground.

Things weren't quite so colorful this year, although an idea was put forth at the last meeting of the business association to pedal up to the bar on bicycles and eat ice cream cones in front of the Old West-style Rex Hotel, in an effort to embarrass beer-bellied biker-types from entering. (The Ice Cream Cone War has not yet occurred.)



Patrons of the Boulder Club mind their own business while some business owners go scouting for scapegoats.

Fran Gaultier, who has owned the Boulder Club for 17 years, said the campaign against her business and the one-sided echoing of neighboring businesses' complaints in the Sentinel did cut into business, but she managed to laugh most of it off.

"I know there's been some discussion about the bar over the last couple of years," said Gaultier. "But I think some people are trying to make us out as a scapegoat for the problems some of the other businesses in town have been having."

"I don't understand why we would be singled out over Joe's (a bar across the street). Along with Scopazzi's, we're the only place open at night in this town. Since all this publicity the sheriff has been keeping a closer watch on us. But business has picked up — a few curiosity seekers have been in."

A couple of such curiosity seekers on a recent night were more amused than offended or afraid of anyone or anything encountered at the Boulder Club. While the Rex Hotel might not be the type of joint you would want to take your mother for Sunday brunch,

it has a certain rough-edged intimacy of its own that can't be duplicated in a lot of glitzy big-city nightclubs.

Despite the renewed interest in the controversial watering hole, it doesn't appear the saloon's legendary status is about to be sabotaged any time soon. Jim Gildner, president of the Boulder Creek business association and one of those complaining last month, apparently has taken that cartoon cowboy's advice and decided not to finish something his group started.

"The Boulder Club does not attract a conformist sort of clientele like you might find in a trendy bar, and so it does produce some people getting drunk in public," Gildner said last week. "I can understand the concern some people have about that, but I think the place has gotten some bum raps."

"But regardless of what I think, it's a delicate issue that will not be taken up by the business association. If some local citizens want to address the problem on their own, that's their business."

—Sam Mitchell & Kevin Hanson

GREG PIO