



DESTINATION FELTON Felton's downtown strip may benefit from the addition of new businesses.

Felton Rising?

With a recently relocated music showcase and the possibility of a spa moving in, Felton inches its way out the forest | by Mike de Give

Felton
A new music venue and a possible spa may swerve more business toward downtown Felton, a small shopping district located on one of the straighter sections of the famously curvy Highway 9 and surrounded by redwood forest.

More foot traffic is welcome news to just about any merchant on the planet. But the prospect of two more attractions seems particularly welcome by shopkeepers in the small town of Felton, which is only eight miles from the center of Santa Cruz but viewed by some shoppers as existing in another dimension.

"People generally don't know we're here," says Karen Diamond, owner of a New Age gift store in Felton called Virgo Rising. "When you talk to people in Santa Cruz, they act like we're in Connecticut or something, while we're really only 10 minutes away."

When Henfling's Firehouse Tavern in Ben Lomond closed in January—and International Music Series promoter Tom Miller moved the show to Don Quixote's in Felton—some of the traffic that used to turn right on Highway 9 began turning left, straight into the heart of Felton's business district. Don Quixote's owner Sue Ko says the live music has already made an obvious impact, although the full benefit won't be realized until word gets around.

"We typically draw people locally. But a couple weeks ago we drew people from the Bay Area. That was kind of exciting," says Ko, who has owned the Felton landmark since 1994.

Adding to Felton's emerging status as a regional draw is the possibility—and this is only a possibility, mind you—

that Kiva Retreat House may open a spa in the building that recently housed Terralace Flowers. A few small Kiva coupons in the former flower shop storefront tipped us off, and an employee at Kiva on Water Street confirms that the spa is considering adding a Felton location, but hasn't made any decisions.

A spa in downtown Felton could potentially do even more for surrounding businesses than live music at Don Quixote's, since it would presumably be open during the day, when other shops are also open for business. A soak, a massage, some steam and then a stroll to the Mineral Matrix rock shop, a taste of cowboy cuisine at the Cowboy Diner, or browsing the racks at Outback Trading Co. could become a new ritual.

Ironically, Felton is home to two of the largest tourist draws in the region—Roaring Camp Railroads and Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park. But the busloads of tourists visiting Roaring Camp for a train ride through the woods typically arrive via Graham Hill or Mount Hermon roads, missing downtown Felton and its shops by a whisker.

"We've never been able to capture that audience," says Pat Verruti, whose family owns Verruti's Felton Liquors and other Felton properties about a quarter mile from the railroad's entrance. "I've listened to people talk about it for 40 years."

Somewhat more visitors arrive downtown from Henry Cowell, mainly in the summer time. Although, "a lot of times they are just stopping for directions," Diamond says.

If Felton seems isolated from the rest Santa Cruz County, it's because of what's on Highway 9 in between—which, unless you're into all that nature stuff,

is a whole lot of nothing. In the eyes of an avid consumer it's a virtual dessert—no strip malls, no Taco Bells, not even a lousy Ocean Chevrolet billboard. Just 10 minutes of irritating, retail-free scenery ... stuff like trees, hiking trails, blue jays, squirrels and bicyclists hugging the narrow road for dear life. The route over Graham Hill Road is essentially more of the same gorgeous drudgery, save for the sweet oasis of a convenience store—slurpies and all—halfway to town. And via Scotts Valley, aka "Capitola North," potential Felton shoppers are picked off by the likes of the Radio Shacks, Kragen's and Starbuck's on Mount Hermon Road.

The situation is a bit vexing to some merchants, who say Felton is a great place to live but the business could be better. "This is a wonderful little community," says Diamond. "When it's foggy and cold in downtown Santa Cruz, it's really nice here. There's not tons of traffic and there's no panhandling."

Still, it's not as if Felton's a ghost town. Highway 9 sees plenty of action, with—believe it or not—about 9,000 cars passing through on average each day, according to Caltrans. But with no substantial industry, many of these trips represent cars carrying Felton residents to work in the morning and back home at night, and not necessarily shoppers. "A lot of people who work in the 'other valley' do their shopping over there because when they get back over the hill at 6:30 or 7 at night, most of the businesses are closed," says Bob Hines, president of the Felton Business Association and news editor of the Valley Press and Scotts Valley Banner.

Many Felton merchants do a brisk business. New

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Leaf Market functions as a quasi town center. The White Raven coffee shop seems to be percolating most of the day. And newcomer Taqueria Vallarta has been packing customers into the former JB's Burgers, whose tables were relatively empty at lunchtime by comparison.

On the other hand are dozens of storefronts that go in and out of business continuously. Furniture stores, kids' clothing, diners, antiques—all manner of businesses suffer a short lifespan in Felton.

Verruti says that's not so much a result of the business climate, but that many people go into business without knowing what they are getting into, and are often undercapitalized to weather the typical growing pains that most businesses experience in the first few years. "These businesses that I see come and go, I believe they are not prepared for the realities of small business—and that is, it's a lot of work," he says.

When the Verruti family opened its liquor store in 1964, Felton's downtown was largely dependent on tourists, and pretty empty most of the year. Verruti still remembers playing football in the vacant parking lot. "We made it in the summer and then tried to hold on during the winter," he says.

The business association—which, like the fire department, is run by volunteers—hosts two events each year to bring more people to town: the Memorial Day Parade and the 10K Race Through the Redwoods. But the association's budget is small, and there's not a lot left over for promotion, Hines says. However, the association is hoping to increase business from people visiting Henry Cowell.

"A great number of people come to Henry Cowell Park in Felton. They go there and do whatever they do in the park, and they get in their cars and go home. We need to find ways to get them to stop in downtown Felton, and have things for them to do when they do stop," says Hines. "The only way to get people to stop in the village area is if you've got something for them to do, and we've been working on that for a long, long, long, long time. Is there an answer? I don't know." ■