

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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Concord's Downtown Becoming Destination

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CONCORD - Could the rumors be true? Could that dormant downtown actually be a cool place to hang out?

At the city's historic hub of Todos Santos Plaza, people are coming to see and be seen. They dine alfresco while watching evening concerts. Kids play on the park slides. Patrons grab ice-cream cones and step across the street to catch a movie.

This fresh vibrancy has some people dreaming up a battle cry that not long ago would have seemed unimaginable: Concord's downtown might have — just maybe—shed its ugly stepsister image to Walnut Creek, the Cinderella of East Bay downtowns.

When the Times called Walnut Creek council members Charlie Abrams and Sue Rainey to check out this radical notion, they didn't call back. Hmm, maybe they were busy having dinner in Concord.

Downtown Concord is no longer a collection of empty lots and struggling stores. And even with all this activity, the town square plans on getting better.

More sidewalks bordering the plaza will soon expand. A white tablecloth Italian eatery opens in November. Several new shops will arrive early next spring.

"When you have friends from out of town, you're going to take them to Todos Santos Plaza because it's a very comfortable place," said Craig Semmelmeier, a development consultant who helped craft the north plaza's image.

"You're not going to take them to Walnut Creek because you don't want to hassle with parking and they've already seen Pottery Barn and Gap."

Indeed, Concord boasts free and accessible parking—an edge it has on its neighbor to the south. Yet even some longtime Concord residents say they prefer Walnut Creek's Broadway Plaza for its upscale restaurants and one-stop shopping philosophy.

"If you're looking for any particular item, you'll find it there," said Carl Brandt, 73. "For shopping there isn't any comparison. But Concord does have a center and you get the flavor of a smaller town even though Concord is actually bigger"

In this year, Concord's 100th birthday, business leaders are noticing increased foot traffic and sales.

Thomas Bloxham, an attorney who owns the building that houses Starbucks Coffee and a few restaurants, said new business signage and park improvements have boosted the plaza's liveliness.

"When I got here in 1985, at high noon you could discharge a firearm in the air and no one would hear it," he

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Fue Thao of F.T. Produce is one of many merchants who bring vegetables to the farmer market in Todos Santos Plaza in Concord. The area holds a Tuesday market year round and a Thursday market through October. Those weekly gatherings are part of what is attracting business to the city's core.

said "Every year since, it's gotten a little better"

Those responsible for the plaza revival of the past year said the success has been in the small ambiance details, such as spiffy signs and planter boxes.

Then there's been the subliminal improvements.

With its proximity to local schools, teens would often loiter outside businesses and in the park—creating an uncomfortable environment for adult patrons, said Semmelmeier, Principal of Main Street Property Services.

"If you see two young men pushing each other back and forth, they may be having fun. But to a 50-year-old woman walking along the sidewalk, it doesn't make her feel good," he said.

Some teens were even dealing drugs in the town square, Concord officials said.

All it took to get rid of them was a sort of symphonic Kryptonite. "We pumped classical music into Salvio Pacheco Square," Semmelmeier said. "It was like



ALYSSA MCKINLEY, 8, Left, and Alyssa Kelly, 8, treat themselves to a birthday gift at Cold Stone Creamery in Concord. The two celebrate with their moms and Alyssa McKinley's sister Vanessa, far right.

using Raid in your back yard. It was subliminal. They say, 'It's not my place,' and just move along."

Customers saw plenty of new businesses arrive at the plaza this year, including a new building anchored by Washington Mutual.

Within the past 12 months, House of Bagels, Cold Stone Creamery and Panama Bay Coffee Co. opened on the north side of the plaza.

Since E.J. Phair Brewing Co. began serving up beers and food in March, people have flocked to its outdoor dining tables especially during the Thursday night summer concerts.

Toscana Ristorante, an Italian eatery, and flower shop Bloom Fusion plan to open nearby within the next two months.

Semmelmeier said he's negotiating with a pizza restaurant, candy store and a women's boutique to take up space on the west end where the Ragsmatazz apparel shop vacated this month.

More people could be scooting along the plaza in two years when Signature Properties plans to finish a 300-unit condominium project one block away, after Lehmer's auto dealership moves off the site.

With all this fresh excitement, Concord has become a player in the local downtown destinations scene, said Florence Weiss, the city's downtown coordinator.

"I don't think we feel second-class to Walnut Creek," she said.



ANGIE HARPER of Antioch, left, spends a beautiful afternoon with her 8-month-old son, Ryan, and Heidi Brown of Pittsburg in front of the fountain in Salvio Pacheco Square in Concord.