

# CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Monday, January 23, 2006

## CHANGING FACE OF DOWNTOWN

### Cities look for community with housing, retail complexes in pedestrian-friendly areas



San Ramon is searching for a place to build a downtown, possibly in the area along Bollinger Canyon Road near Central Park.



Maintenance workers Kris Franklin, left, and Jason Calkins install a parking sign on South J Street in Livermore's new downtown.



Shoppers walk in front of Main Street Rags in Walnut Creek. With an array of shops, the city is considered a model for other downtowns.



People make their way down Main Street in Martinez as store owner Arna Morse, right, and Moira Seymour enjoy summerlike weather outside Attic Child on Sunday.

By Danielle Samaniego  
CONTRA COSTA TIMES

**L**IKE MANY CITIES, San Ramon is hoping to find itself in its downtown.

"They have suburban shopping centers, but no soul and these cities are desperate for a soul," said Craig Semmelmeier, principal and founder of Main Street Property Services Inc., a Lafayette firm that helps cities bring businesses downtown.

Whether it's a glitzy lifestyle center, a quaint "old town" or a vibrant plaza, cities across the region are revamping, revitalizing and reinvesting in their downtowns with the same goal in mind: creating a community identity.

"I think downtowns will continue to be revitalized throughout the state," said Roland Peterson, president of the California Downtown Association. "What makes a downtown work in my mind is what I guess I would call a sense of place, where the community of that city feels it's a comfortable place not only to shop but to socialize and meet each other; enjoy life together."

Some call it new urbanism -- integrating housing and work places with shops, entertainment, schools, parks, and civic facilities within walking distance. Others call it the heart and soul of communities, an essential component to a city's success.

Local downtown discussions are rampant these days. Walnut Creek wants to build on its success, Martinez wants to resuscitate it, and San Ramon wants to

create it. These are just some examples.

"I think people need a town square that defines the community and, secondly, it's got to be a great lifestyle place too," said Marc Grisham, Pittsburg's city manager.

Changing lifestyles is key. Over time, downtowns have evolved from trading posts and retail centers in the early, pre-car years to financial districts in the 1970s and '80s, when retail shifted to strip malls and emporiums. These days, the trend is swinging back toward a walkable, shoppable social gathering spot.

"Ten years ago it had to be a shopping center or a mall," Semmelmeier said. "Today 'mall' is a dirty word and everyone wants to be a downtown square."

Semmelmeier has worked with numerous cities throughout the region, including Concord, Orinda and Pleasanton.

Concord is one of the newest success stories. Empty lots and struggling stores have given way to specialty retail shops

and restaurants, complete with a movie theater and plenty of park activities. City officials have touted the Todos Santos Plaza turnaround as a great shopping destination rivaling Walnut Creek.

Of course Walnut Creek is considered by many the downtown mecca of Contra Costa County for its surging shopping core. Broadway Plaza pulls in 45 percent of the city's retail sales tax revenues alone. City officials are gearing up for a major expansion this year.

The city also benefits from the appeal of its "old" and "new" downtowns split by Mt. Diablo Boulevard that have been successful based on the contrasts of big retail and specialty shops.

Still, the reality is that most cities cannot be Walnut Creek nor do they want to be, as city officials will attest to. Instead, cities like Martinez and Pittsburg push for the old town angle.

Martinez is in the process of nailing down a blueprint for its downtown that will bring in more businesses and up to 1,000 new homes while maintaining its

inherent historic charm. A solid downtown street grid and historic buildings dotted throughout distinguish its potential.

As it stands now, downtown Martinez is struggling. Most of the businesses lining Main Street today vary from antique stores to specialty clothing shops and bail bonds.

"You go to Pleasant Hill ... and it's alive after five (o'clock), just like Walnut Creek, and unfortunately in Martinez it's not like that yet," said Martinez Mayor Rob Schroder, referring to a lack of foot traffic downtown when county offices close.

"We've got the waterfront, it's historic and I think we need to play upon all of that," Schroder said. "We can turn it (downtown) into a place that people will want to come to because it's unique, but also residents will want to have something to do. Most cities have their unique personalities and they need to build on those personalities."

Then there are those cities that are faced with the task of creating a downtown out of nothing. In San Ramon, an economic strategic plan includes establishing a state-of-the-art mixed-use "lifestyle center," an open-air design with a mix of housing and an array of retailers -- but with no traditional anchor store -- that could serve as a downtown. The city also wants a new City Hall and more office space.

"It's really a mixture of uses and a mixture working well on a good scale," said Peterson. "Each downtown has to have its own identity for its city."

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"The Steelworker in Pittsburg" is a landmark in the middle of old downtown. Several major projects are in the works, including the Gateway project.

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## A Regional look at Downtowns

### Here's a look at what some cities across the region are doing for their downtowns:

■ **ANTIOCH:** National developer Arcadis is putting together a plan for a revamped, vibrant downtown that's expected to address soil contamination and preservation of historic buildings as well as constructing a promenade and new homes and changing the orientation of buildings to face the San Joaquin River.

■ **BENICIA:** Construction continues on the Harbor Walk project, a 36-unit residential complex with space for retail shops at the end of First Street. The project is scheduled for completion this year.

■ **BRENTWOOD:** The City Council approved plans to revitalize its downtown and bring more retail and restaurants to the city's cultural core.

■ **CONCORD:** City officials will continue to build on the success of Todos Santos Plaza with added dining, new retail shops and expanded sidewalks.

■ **DANVILLE:** City enacted an ordinance to rezone certain areas of town to create better incentives for merchants/landlords to upgrade their businesses and are constantly looking at ways to keep its downtown a vital destination.

■ **DUBLIN:** City is developing a transit village on its side of the BART station that includes a hotel, apartments, a restaurant and retail shops, and would occupy 7.26 acres in the 6600 block of Golden Gate Drive.

■ **EL CERRITO:** City is trying to build on the four-year revitalization of El Cerrito Plaza by drawing more businesses to the surrounding area.

■ **HERCULES:** City is planning for its Sycamore Main Street project that includes four buildings for retail, housing and office space over a 1.4-acre parcel on Sycamore Avenue, just west of San Pablo Avenue.

■ **LIVERMORE:** City wants to build on its just-completed \$12 million project to make First Street more pedestrian friendly by narrowing the roadway and adding trellises, fountains and lots of new landscaping and street lights. It plans to bring in more downtown housing, and hopefully a new cinema complex, performing arts complex and retail development.

■ **MARTINEZ:** City is moving on a downtown plan that will bring in an influx of businesses and up to 1,000 new homes while preserving its historic integrity.

■ **MORAGA:** City, which has two shopping centers in lieu of a downtown, is focusing its efforts on revitalizing the business community, with a new economic advisory group, a re-energized Chamber of Commerce and specific development plans for the shopping centers.

■ **OAKLEY:** Downtown plans call for upgraded building frontage, attractive street furnishings, multiunit infill housing, additional parking, enhanced infrastructure, lush landscaping and a pedestrian-friendly environment.

■ **ORINDA:** The City Council is considering hiring an urban design firm to help revitalize its existing downtowns.

■ **PINOLE:** City has a downtown mixed-use project for San Pablo Avenue that includes construction of a 15,000-square-foot, two-story building with ground floor retail space, and eight second-story apartment units with covered parking, as well as adjoining site improvements including parking, landscaping and a pedestrian walkway. Also working on mak-

ing downtown more pedestrian friendly with a circulation plan.

■ **PITTSBURG:** Several major projects are in the works, including the gateway project, a three-story mixed-use building with ground-floor retail and upper-floor homes; the Black Diamond project, which aims to bring in new downtown commercial offices and housing; and a marina master plan.

■ **PLEASANT HILL:** Downtown revitalization efforts are focused on the Contra Costa Shopping Center, located next to the Crossroads Center project. It could bring up to 330,000 square feet of retail floor space and up to 60 residences in lieu of some retail space.

■ **RICHMOND:** City is constructing two major projects, including the 12th and Macdonald Mixed Use Project, covering two city blocks with 238 condominiums, about 25,000 square feet of ground-floor retail space. An intermodal transit station is also planned as part of its Metro Walk Richmond Transit Village project. The \$6.4 million station will consist of an above-ground station building, an outdoor plaza with canopy and public artworks. The transit village, once completed, will consist of 231 housing units, 27,000 square feet of retail space and a 800-car parking garage.

■ **SAN RAMON:** City has an economic strategic plan that includes establishing a state-of-the-art mixed-use "lifestyle center," an open-air design with a mix of housing and an array of retailers -- but with no traditional anchor store -- that could serve as a downtown. The city also wants a new City Hall and more office space.

■ **WALNUT CREEK:** City is preparing to adopt a general plan that will serve as a blueprint for the next 20 years, while expanding its sales tax base, funding a new downtown library and providing more housing.