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Square dreams come true

Projects bring downtown Concord to life day & night

BY DAVID GOLL
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The revitalization of downtown Concord that began with the transformation of Salvio Pacheco Square in 2004 has become contagious.

A dramatic redesign of what used to be an aging office building on the north side of Todos Santos Plaza turned the "square" into a three-story, 36,600-square-foot collection of offices, retail shops and restaurants centered around a courtyard.

Concord

Size:

31.13 square miles

Population, (2005):

127,600

Projected population (2010):

130,400

Mean household income (2005):

\$73,100

Number of jobs (2005):

66,370

Projected jobs (2010):

70,180

Largest employers: Bank of America Tech Center, Wells Fargo Credit Corp., Chevron Credit Corp., Comcast, Systron Donner, Adecco Employment Service, Raymond Interior Systems, Siemens USA and Harris & Associates



Stephanie Secrest / East Bay Business Times

Craig Semmelmeier and Florence Weiss expect the success of Salvio Pacheco Square to spread to neighboring blocks.

Its popularity both during the daytime and evening, as well as on weekends, has led to an increase in city-sponsored events in the plaza, renovation of nearby stores and an influx of new businesses, including such upscale trendsetters as Peet's Coffee & Tea.

The upswing was long overdue. Downtown Concord, like so many central business districts in East Bay suburbia, had been declining since the 1960s, when outlying shopping malls siphoned off customers and businesses.

SQUARE: Remodel work moves to west side

But in Concord — as in Pleasant Hill, Pittsburg, Livermore, Hayward, Berkeley and the region's largest city, Oakland — the pendulum is swinging back in downtown's favor. Redevelopment projects in all of these cities have brought people and businesses back to central business districts.

"We were talking about this in the abstract three years ago, and nothing happens quickly, but it's remarkable how different things are today," said Florence Weiss, downtown coordinator for the city of Concord. "When we had the symphony event in the park, every seat was taken. With some of our music events this summer, we drew crowds of between 2,000 and 2,500 to each concert."

The city's Redevelopment Agency, which sponsors the annual schedule of events at the plaza, even attracted a crowd of 1,500 to watch "I Love Lucy" reruns.

Building on that momentum, the west side of Todos Santos - the historical center of Contra Costa County's largest city - is next in line for a face-lift. Peet's will open its first Concord store on a block designated as the Shops at Todos Santos Plaza. in early November.

Craig Semmelmeier, principal of Lafayette's Main Street Property Services Inc., helped lead the redesign and leasing efforts at Salvio Pacheco Square and is doing the same at the Shops at Todos Santos Plaza. Buildings facing Mount Diablo Street and the plaza, between Willow Pass Road and Salvio Street, will be strengthened structurally and some will be given new, updated facades. As leases expire, new "more productive" businesses will be brought onto the block, which is owned by Ed Andrews and his family.

Work will probably get under way in the spring, Semmelmeier said.

"The buildings will be given the bones of a downtown building," he said. "City officials are interested in changing the appearance of downtown to a more urban look. The result of the first phase (at the Shops at Todos Santos Plaza) will be quite dramatic."

Other new tenants on the block will include Sway, a young-women's apparel store, and Una Mas Mexican Grill.

Semmelmeier, who puts a lot of effort into attracting what he considers the appropriate kinds of commercial occupants to his new and renovated projects throughout the East Bay, said the tenant mix at Salvio Pacheco Square has changed a bit from in the project's early stages.

"Originally, it was thought the entire ground floor would be retail, with offices on the upper floors," he said. "But retail and restaurants have been restricted to the first floor facing (Todos Santos Plaza) which has proven to be a great way to attract people to the development."

Today, only one office upstairs and two facing the



STEPHANIE SECRET / EAST BAY BUSINESS TIMES

The revitalization of Salvio Pacheco Square has helped attract new tenants to Concord's downtown and set the stage for other projects.

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Craig Semmelmeier Principal, Main Street Property Services Inc.

interior courtyard remain vacant, Semmelmeier said. The project is so successful that the owner of Salvio Pacheco Square is mulling the possibility of acquiring more property in the area, Semmelmeier added.

Another indicator of success? Rental rates in the area have tripled to \$3.50 to \$4 per square foot.

Combining success in the immediate plaza area with the popular Brenden Theatres Concord 14, located one block to the west, improvements will come incrementally to neighboring downtown blocks, Semmelmeier and Weiss say.

As so often happens in redeveloped commercial areas, restaurants have led the resurgence, Weiss said. The E.J. Phair Brewing Co. in Salvio Pacheco Square, for example, has been a major attraction to that development. Downtown proponents hope those diners will become shoppers.

Semmelmeier said perceptions of the city center are changing for the better, a key development in revitalizing any formerly flagging district.

"The city is pushing all the right buttons downtown," Semmelmeier said. "All of the community events, the concerts, twice-weekly farmers market and other things have been well promoted, bringing more people downtown to see the changes."

Semmelmeier said that on a few occasions as he walked the district, passers-by have thanked him for his efforts in revitalizing downtown.

"I've had moms with kids in tow come up to me to compliment me on my involvement," he said. "That has just never happened before. It's one of the best feelings you can get."

dgoll@bizjournals.com | 925-598-1436