

DOWNTOWN DREAMING

Entrepreneur pictures future of retail

By **Martin Richard**
STAFF WRITER

SAN LEANDRO — If downtown San Leandro were a class at a university, Craig Semmelmeier would be the professor.

His firm, Main Street Property Services Inc., has been contracted by the city to help revitalize the downtown area by attracting more retailers and making it the destination spot everyone wishes it would be.

On Thursday, he gave city and business leaders more reason to believe that his firm can pull off that task. He was invited to talk about downtown retail trends at the San Leandro Chamber of Commerce's membership luncheon at the main library, and he wasted no time schooling the audience on how downtown is set to ride the retail wave.

"I think downtown San Leandro has tremendous potential," said the principal and founder of the Lafayette firm. "It's more similar to the other downtowns I've worked on than many of you could imagine."

Semmelmeier's talk was a classic exercise in Downtown 101.

He started off by asking the question "what is retailing?" then asked if any of the 85 people in the audience could properly define the concept.

Very few raised their hands, and therein lay Semmelmeier's first point.

Retailing, the ability to take goods and services and add value to them, has significantly evolved over the years, he said, and stores such as Wal-Mart and Target aren't going to be the ones capitalizing on it.

"There's a great future ahead for retailing," he said. "And it's something the big-box retailer can't do."

The future, he went on to say, relies on smaller, more specialized stores that make people feel at home. Those are going to be the types of businesses, he said, that drive the future growth of downtowns all over, and San Leandro will be one of them.

For one, he said, downtown San Leandro has the right



MIKE LUCIA - Staff photos

CRAIG SEMMELMEIER, PRINCIPAL of Main Street Property Services, was the featured speaker at the San Leandro Chamber of Commerce membership luncheon on Thursday at the main library.

combination of factors to turn it around, even though the city has struggled in the past to attract new businesses.

"Downtowns like San Leandro's often give people low self-esteem," he said, alluding to the area's past reputation as a declining retail hub. "But I want to assure you ... there is potential in San Leandro, and the things that you need are there."

Councilman Michael Gregory, whose council district includes downtown, said he was inspired by those words of wisdom.

He said he felt confident in Main Street's ability to turn the downtown area around, especially since the city has already laid a foundation with the recently adopted downtown transit-oriented development plan, and a steady infusion of street and facade improvements.

He also said Semmelmeier's vision for downtown San Leandro works because the goal is not to create another downtown Walnut Creek or Union Square in San Francisco, which often compete with other downtowns in the Bay Area, but rather to make it a place that feels like a neighborhood destination.

"If we do our jobs correctly, we won't be like Walnut Creek, competing with Union Square, San Ramon or anybody," Gregory said, "because our goal is to draw people from places like Oakland and Hayward."

"And what I admire about Craig is he has helped cities learn that," he added. "If we listen, we'll do it."