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Life in LAMORINDA

Progress Report on the New Lafayette

...continued from page 1. Recently approved is a 21 home subdivision, Hidden Oaks, of which approximately half are finished. An 8-lot subdivision in Burton Valley has just been given the green light. Finally, City Manager Steve Falk notes, "a developer is proposing to build 80 luxury condominium units on the site of the old Hillside Motel."

When asked if the building frenzy will end in the near future, City Planner Niroop Srivatsa said, "We think this is just the beginning, in fact our con-

reinforce opens space systems and design sustainable site-specific landscapes and buildings.

This didn't happen overnight. Falk gives credit to the City Council and cites their impressive academic credentials. "We have, I kid you not, the smartest City Council on the planet. They took a leadership role; they understood that the city needed to lead the way towards higher quality development. They took a political risk to hire a redevelopment agency. In doing so, it captured more revenue that stimulated projects and got the ball rolling."

"The upshot of all this



Everything's in bloom on the busy streets of the new Lafayette.



La Fiesta Square in Lafayette provides a perfect spot to while away the hours on a beautiful afternoon. photo by Andy Scheck

cern is that the growth is coming so fast that we can't plan for it adequately.

The City has recently embarked on a strategic planning process, through a series of community conversations...out of that process will emerge a plan that Lafayette will have for the next 50 years. It will have an important impact on how downtown Lafayette develops."

To that end, strategic planners Wallace, Roberts and Todd (WRT) were recently approved by the City Council to guide the downtown area. WRT's goal is to help public and private clients envision smarter development patterns, revitalize neighborhoods, forge lively new communities, integrate and

has been between 1995 and 2005 between public and private investment, there has been \$75 million dollars invested in Lafayette. We want to be the place

where Lamorinda residents will do their daily shopping, daily visits to restaurants, pick up their dry cleaning, stop at the bakery, all of which they can do with convenient parking," notes Falk.

The biggest project currently under construction is the Lafayette Mercantile building. "We view that as a catalyst project, so spectacular that it will draw other developers into town when it's completed. It's going to be magnificent."

The city block size buildings, 55,000 square feet in total are expected to house a day spa, a men's clothing shop and an upscale restaurant on the street level with Class A office space above, and underground parking below. These pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use buildings will have a European feel with a public plaza and lots of decorative planters. The Mercantile is expected to open some time in July and is almost completely leased.

Even small local merchants are sensing a change. "Lafayette's growth has been very good for the store (Nitro Dog), mainly because the new retail that has come in, it's maintained the spirit of unique independently-owned retail," notes co-owner and manager Len Ofiana. "There's been a big change in the last 3 or 4 years, especially since Chow opened. It's created a lot of foot traffic here; it's given us a lot of exposure that we wouldn't have had."

What does all this mean to Lafayette? Aside from 30 eateries on "Restaurant Row," one obvious positive is increased sales tax revenue. Accord-

ing to the Chamber of Commerce, "There is a direct correlation between purchases made in Lafayette and the services that the City is able to provide its citizens. Nearly 12% of all sales tax collected is returned to the City and is a significant part, 28.5%, of the City Budget. Street repairs, police services, youth and senior services are only a few of the programs that may be reduced or increased depending on the amount of money available to the City's coffers.

How come Moraga and Orinda haven't grown to the extent that Lafayette has? "What will happen in Orinda is redevelopment; we have some wonderful sites for opportunity. We are on a similar track as Lafayette, as far as wanting to have a downtown strategy. We've interviewed consultants and solicited proposals and now we're just waiting for our grant. If we get the grant, then we're ready to proceed to the Council with a recommendation to hire someone," says Orinda City Manager Janet Keeter. She continues, "One of the things we want to do in Orinda is increase our commerce, while at the same time maintain our identity and charm, we don't want to exploit that. We want to increase amenities and services to the residents."

Located at the end of basically dead end roads, Moraga has had some geographic hurdles to cross to

bring in new businesses. Despite its unique location, there have been a number of additions to the two retail areas of town: Blockbuster, Starbucks, a large Orchard Supply Hardware store, Across the Way, Star Pilates, HomeGoods, Dahn Yoga, and Showcase Framing Studio. In addition, after many meetings, and a fair amount of citizen input, some positive, some negative, the Moraga Commons Skate Park was finally built. The historic Moraga Barn is currently under construction. Moraga will never be the next Lafayette,

but many residents are happy with its residential, close-knit, small town feel.

The sum of Lamorinda is more than its parts. While there will always be growing pains, when new homes are built and old businesses torn down, this change is a good thing. It serves us all. Who knew that three smallish bedroom communities set in the rolling hills of sunny California, with award winning schools, and friendly neighbors could create this very real place that is like no other.

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