

What's Going On At The Rheem Center? Fudge Alley, a Moraga Business Icon, at a Turning Point By Sophie Braccini



Inside Fudge Alley, home-made fudge, candy and ice cream in an old fashion decor

Photo Sophie Braccini

Frank Chao will be turning eighty this year. One could never tell, watching the Taiwanese shopkeeper interact joyfully with young dancers from the nearby California Academy of Performing Arts (CAPA), who come to satisfy their craving for sweets between two entreechats. Fudge Alley, Chao's candy and ice cream parlor, has been in operation for more than thirty years but the future is uncertain for the smooth old gentleman, who doesn't look much older than sixty, since he didn't renew his five-year lease with the Rheem Center's owner, Kimco Realty Corporation.

Chao considered this his American dream, a great place for retirement. But eating habits change and the business has been declining over the years. Still, Frank is a favorite. George Quintero, owner of the Moraga and Lafayette Pet Shoppes, says, "If somebody should get an award in Moraga, it's Frank. He's been a great presence in the Center for many, many years, taking care of everybody's kids." Another Moraga resident, now in his early thirties adds: "We used to go to Fudge Alley all the time with my parents when I was a kid. We had hotdogs, fudge, cookies and ice cream. Frank is definitely a Moraga icon."

For many teens, Fudge Alley has been a favorite "hang out," although this has not been without some controversy. Rumors link the shop to teenage delinquency, vandalism and other illegal activities that have occurred in the vicinity, but Moraga Police Chief Mark Ruppenthal believes that Frank Chao is an honest man.

Quintero identifies another reason why business owners at Rheem are having a hard time. "(The Rheem Center) has changed owners four times in the last five years," he says, "and every time, the business property tax goes up and

we, the tenants, are the ones paying for it."

The same thing happened to Beauty Source a few months ago; a proposed 25% increase in rent drove the store out of the Rheem Center. Both Beauty Source and the Karate and Fitness Place, another former Rheem business, have relocated to the Moraga Center.

At Rheem in the meantime, stores remain empty. Spaces once occupied by such businesses as Mia and Friends, Box Guy, Star Shoes, Beauty Source, 2nd Generation Consignment and Specialtees Outlet have been vacant for months. That may be the reason that Kimco is letting Chao stay in his store, with a month-to-month contract, until they have found a new tenant.

Edy Schwartz, President of the Chamber of Commerce of Moraga, comments, "The business community is concerned about what is going on at this shopping center. Shop keepers are having a hard time reaching and communicating with the owner and have been unable to negotiate the significant rent increase that's been asked of them."

Grant Stubblefield of Lori's Perfect Tan, which is also located in the Rheem Center, says, "Our contract is up in less than a month and, in spite of repeated attempts, we have been unable to reach the responsible party at Kimco and still do not have a new contract proposal." The storeowner may consider not staying in Rheem if the increase is commensurate with what has been seen recently. "They are asking for Walnut Creek rent levels," says Stubblefield, "in a shopping center that has not been improved in years and where doing business is challenging." Kimco could not be reached for comment on this issue.

Meanwhile, Chao is contemplating a return to his homeland of Taiwan. "That's where I want my bones to be buried," says the smiling gentleman.