

The Retail Success in Lafayette, How It All Happened

By Sophie Braccini



Mt Diablo Blvd. features the "Love Lafayette" banners Photo Sophie Braccini

Lafayette City Manager Steve Falk remembers what Lafayette looked like fifteen years ago. At that time none could have imagined that a specialty store like Misto Lino would leave Walnut Creek's Broadway Plaza and relocate to Lafayette. "Ten years ago we were looking up to Walnut Creek, but today retailers come to Lafayette instead of Walnut Creek to find better lease options with the right demographics." To reach that level of appeal, the city and its partners needed to create a momentum. It started with a simple idea that sounds like a statement, "Love Lafayette." "We first printed 1000 bumper stickers, there are now more than 25,000 on the roads," says Falk. "The idea was to allow people to project their civic pride, make a statement of their hometown." And when the first set of banners proudly reading "Love Lafayette" were hung, the town got a 100% positive response.

The branding of Lafayette was just part of the strategy. As Falk explains, "This is the result of very long term planning." The first plan was adopted in 1988. "For it to succeed, it had to be carried out systematically and consistently," Falk adds. Steps were taken for many years as a result of a partnership between landowners, developers, business community and town. "The town has to have a coherent plan and provide the infrastructure for the retail development," says Craig Semmelmeier, Principal of Main Street Property. "Our job is to find the unique tenants that are going to do well in Lafayette and bring something special to the town. We have a strategy of uniqueness, we fight "ordinary" everyday." The retail specialist has been working for ten years with Cortese Investment, the developer of La Fiesta Square and the Mercantile.

Falk explains that the "Restaurant Row" concept is part of this strategy of uniqueness. "The restaurants represent Lafayette's great competitive advantage. Because of Chow, Pizza Antica came, then Metro, then Gigi. Quality restaurants beget quality restaurants."

Jay Lifson, the Executive Director of the Chamber of Commerce, was ready to support that direction. "Restaurants are the single largest contributors to sales tax in town," he explains, "and the town has recognized early their importance."

To build on the awareness, the Chamber organizes A Taste of

Lafayette each May that features many local restaurants. The Arts and Wine festival, that draws thousands each year, has a very positive impact on local retail as well, as have the Lafayette Jazz Festival and Rock the Plaza.

"The Chamber is part of the equation and we defend our members," explains Lifson, "We do not always agree with the city. We have supported most of the initiatives that it has proposed, but we have always fought any increase in the sales tax and do not agree on who is responsible for building more parking."

The Chamber is participating in the development of the new downtown strategic plan that will replace the 1988 version. "We are now developing a new downtown strategy for the next twenty years to come," explains Falk. The new strategy for downtown Lafayette that is in development by WRT Design aims at capturing the uniqueness of the city. "What we gathered from the public input sessions," says Jim Stickley of WRT Design, "is that residents see Lafayette as a rural community, with a strong identity and connectiveness to the natural beauty of its surroundings." Another aspect that was gathered by the consultant is the desire expressed by the people to find even greater retail diversity in their downtown.

Steve Ware of Ware Design is an active member of the Chamber of Commerce and the Lamorinda Sunshine Rotary who participates in all the public sessions of the strategic planning, "It is important that the town plan for the future," says the business owner, "they would be negligent if they hadn't." He recognizes that even if the plans proposed are good for business, it will be hard to finance.

Ware hopes that, as with the library project, all the groups and organizations in town will work together to pull it off.

In order to succeed, the new strategic plan needs to bring in the property owners as well. "More and more of them are joining in the public sessions," explain members of the WRT Design team, "we need their input and their buy-in." Some property owners are local people, like Steve Cortese and the Bruzzone family. They actively negotiate with the city. A good example is the Mercantile where the city assisted the developer in return for the right for all to use the downstairs parking after business hours. Unfortunately, others have little tie with the city and Jay Lifson has a thick pile of returned mail in his office from a mailing he sent to all business property owners, "They have moved and have not informed us. We can't reach them," says a regretful Lifson.

Of course all is not always easy when private and public interest intersect. "I would compare the situation to the Reservoir," explains Steve Falk with some humor, "on the surface it looks peaceful and beautiful, but below the surface, it kicks like hell!"