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## Historical Facelift for Plaza Park Shops

By Cathy Tyson



Proposed North Elevation Graphic provided

Usually the goal of a facelift is to make the recipient look younger- in this case property owners want to bring back the historical charm of the heart of Lafayette. Starting with Squirrels and encompassing the four adjoining shops through what used to be A-1 Photo Lab and Handlebar Toys, the prominent, though aging establishments are in the preliminary stages of getting approval from the City for facade improvements.

"Due to the gradual deterioration of these historic buildings over the last few decades and the difficulties of current economic times, the shops around Plaza Park have lost their place as the economic and cultural heart of Lafayette," said architect Sudhish Mohindroo of SZFM Design Studio in a description of the project. Mohindroo is the design genius behind other notable local projects including the renovated La Fiesta Square, the Mercantile, and the currently-under-construction streetscape improvement project along Mt. Diablo Boulevard.

Looking to restore cultural significance, invigorate the area, add outdoor seating and retain small village scale is not easy. Throw in upgrading outdated utilities and making the buildings structurally stable, while bringing them up to modern retail standards is quite a challenge, so building owners are making careful strategic improvements.

The proposal before a recent Design Review meeting outlined a number of changes to the buildings. Enhancing the 1950s diner look of Squirrels Coffee Shop with new lighting, new doors, and new paint will emphasize the mid-century look of the building.

The Pioneer Store dating from 1860, which is now A-1 Photo Lab, will have its historic gabled roof line restored, a new wood front porch and new windows. The owner is working with the Lafayette Historical Society to keep renovations true to the original form.

The Handlebar Toy and Plaza Way Cleaners buildings will receive similar, yet distinct historic improvements.

Parking for the area has been the subject of lengthy discussions, not only for this row of businesses, but for the Park Theater, just a stone's throw down the block. Addressing a comprehensive solution for parking is crucial for the success of this renovation on Plaza Way, along with Fenton's coming to the now vacant Park Theater.

The City Council has expressed support for preliminary plans for a consolidated parking area in the rear of the shops, encompassing not only expanded parking, but a comprehensive parking solution with a number of components. A subcommittee of city representatives is actively working on a solution for the area, and they are expected to produce Plaza Way Overlay in the coming months.

Restaurant Row Meets the Streets?

Asian street vendor-inspired restaurant proposes new location

Also on the May 29 Design Review agenda was a study session to get preliminary feedback on demolishing the existing building across the street from Chow on Lafayette Circle - home of the Art Room and the Lafayette Gallery, and build Boo Koo - a new restaurant that features fresh, healthy quickly-prepared southeast Asian street food. With a successful shop in Mill Valley, the owners are looking to expand in Lafayette and proposed a contemporary small cafe, with lots of outdoor seating to take advantage of the existing trees on the property. In general the Design Review Commissioners liked the project, but suggested additional fine tuning to integrate the indoor and outdoor spaces. Boo Koo is a spin on "beaucoup" meaning many, much, an abundance - referring to many sparkling flavors, as in their spicy ginger beef banh mi or pho ga. C. Tyson

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