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## Future Face Lift for Fiesta Lane

By Sophie Braccini



Craig Semmelmeier shows the site to be renovated.  
Photo Sophie Braccini

Some might remember the old office building in the middle of what is now La Fiesta Square, and the former plaza that lacked cohesiveness and vibrancy. With vision and a will to change, the area was transformed into a sought-after and successful commercial area in downtown Lafayette.

Craig Semmelmeier wants to bring this same vibrancy to the property across the street on Lafayette Circle, called Fiesta Lane (where Petar's was located). Fiesta Lane is a 37,000 square foot property that was the location of the home of Lafayette founders Margaret and Elam Brown. It included three buildings: a small 400 square foot garage that housed the florist, Twigs Floral and Art; a 1,250 square foot stucco building where The Art Room is located; and a 10,552 retail building bordered to the north by Happy Valley Creek.

The property belongs to the Whitten family, who hired SZFM Design Studio and Suddhish Mohindroo (who also designed The Mercantile on Mt. Diablo Boulevard) to create the new look of the area; Semmelmeier, of Main Street Property Services, is the developer.

"The city of Lafayette encouraged us to create a comprehensive plan for the site, including the two smaller

buildings that were not up to code," said Semmelmeier. "They would like to see something that has more opportunity for economic vitality." The vision of modern street-like retail meant that the little garage had to go - and the old tenants with it - to become a parking space.

The building has been completely torn down, and Sandra Meily, co-owner of Twigs, says they have not found a new location. "We understand the need to modernize," she said, "even if the business had been here for 20 years. The problem is that we can't find another space and Main Street Property has not been able to help."

Meily was distressed to learn that the new florist, Florets, in the Clock Tower building is owned by Main Street Property Services.

"Twigs was a more traditional type of flower shop," said Semmelmeier. "We have talented floral designers working at Florets; it's managed more like a co-op, the team is phenomenal. They are doing so much better than was anticipated."

Linda Higham, owner of The Storyteller Bookstore, was told last March that she would have to leave the space. "The new landlord had new plans for the building (when Petar's closed)," she said. The space has been taken over by the new anchor of Fiesta Lane, the restaurant The Cooperage American Grille, which will occupy the entire storefront of the building along Lafayette Circle.

"That store front is going to be stunning," says Semmelmeier. "It will respect the interesting elements of the original framing of the building, but everything that's dated will go. We will add a pedestrian walkway in front, new pedestrian crosswalk to connect the site with La Fiesta Square, change the parking, and clear the view of the creek."

The renovation's general theme is to respect the existing building, highlighting interesting features. "We want to maintain the rustic charm of the building, repairing and preserving the terra cotta roof," added Semmelmeier. "The new tenants are encouraged to express themselves, while respecting the design guidelines that SZFM defined."

Double door or sliding doors are encouraged, as well as glass display windows possibly made of non-reflective glass, with custom patterns, metal signs, and other elements that will increase the diversity of the street look such as recessed storefronts or multiple corner storefronts. "Each new business will use their entire storefront opening and personalize it using mostly wood or metal and glass," said Semmelmeier.

Semmelmeier has not yet signed leases for all five of the available spaces. "We are missing a walking shoe store in Lafayette, or active women's wear/yoga clothing," he said. "We also think that a creative designer of women's apparel would do well here."

He added that he would have liked an ice cream parlor, but Smitten, the ice-cream maker that uses liquid nitrogen to make ice cream on demand is slated to replace Cold Stone Creamery in La Fiesta Square, just a block away. (Lamorinda Weekly reached out to Smitten for confirmation, but did not get a response before press time.)

As for The Art Room, the plan is for the outdated building to be replaced by a new building, up to code, during the next phase of the project.

"We are working with Carrie (Klein, owner of the Art Room); we love this business, it draws a lot of people, children and parents," said Semmelmeier. "It brings in traffic and it is good for the neighbors. There is a tremendous link, and we would love them to stay here. Art really fits here and we will need to make it more visible and inviting."

Three businesses that used to be in Fiesta Lane, The Storyteller, P & L Framing, and Treasure Trove have all moved to the Lafayette Plaza, behind McCaulou's and Peet's Coffee. According to Hingham, they are very happy there.

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[back](#)

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