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Sinkhole May be Swallowing Local Businesses

By Cathy Dausman



Gayle Somers, Home Made Cafe at the Moraga sinkhole Photo Cathy Dausman

business, though, Somers gets serious. She says traffic signage is confusing, parking is challenging and people don't even know Rheem Center businesses are open. The week of April 4 was "the toughest week we ever had," Somers said, citing a perfect storm of spring break downturn and traffic detour woes.

Rheem Valley Pet Shoppe lost a day of business when the sinkhole appeared. "People drive crazy," owner Jennifer Lenfestey explained, adding the detour is at times little more than a parking lot and is "getting old at three-plus weeks." The pet store takes deliveries twice weekly from large trucks, and that has been challenging. "Why not open at least half the street?" Lenfestey wondered.

Elite Unisex Hair Design owner Martha Estrada was disappointed that the only walk-in one spring break afternoon was not a customer but a Lamorinda Weekly reporter. Estrada says the street closure and detour has definitely affected her business, leaving little or no nearby parking for her customers. She says it has been so quiet many days she has had to close. Estrada makes this plea to those who might visit her shop: "Be patient!"

Lamorinda resident and businesswoman Natasha Grasso designs and manufactures handcrafted jewelry. Grasso recently moved her studio and boutique from Burlingame to the Rheem Center, but is fearful of a public perception that the area is presently closed or inaccessible.

"The lack of traffic and stigma around the Rheem shopping center is a real problem for my business and I know I am not the only one," she said. "A setback like this threatens the health of our business community and drives our residents and customers to other shopping areas that are more accessible," she said, adding that she thinks it would be helpful to put together a small group "think tank" to brainstorm and spearhead some solutions.

William Chao, of Chef Chao, also reports his restaurant business has been "down significantly" as a result of the sinkhole, saying he has even had to close "for a couple days." Chao told Moraga Chamber Executive Director Kathe Nelson that "PG&E estimates that it will take two to three months to complete repairs; however, I worry that will continue to hurt our business. I'm hoping you can help us by expediting the repair construction."

While Autohaus owner Xiao Zheng agrees the sinkhole detour is inconvenient he cannot complain about business downturn because he does not depend on foot traffic. "It is what it is," he said. Zhen said the customer cars he moved away from the sinkhole "smelled like a gas chamber"

It's not business as usual at the Rheem Center.

Life has taken on a twist for the merchants at the center since a sinkhole opened a portion of Rheem Boulevard March 13 and closed a major Moraga intersection. Through traffic has been rerouted along the Rheem Center parking lot, adding to congestion, diminishing parking availability and frustrating some owners and customers.

Home/made kitchen café and bakery was scheduled to host a Moraga Chamber of Commerce event March 14, right when natural gas service was shut off. Owners Gayle Somers and Aly Bean Miller improvised by cooking 10 pounds of pasta over a propane camp stove.

"It's a good thing we grew up in the San Joaquin Valley," Somers laughed, referring to their camping know-how.

When asked how the detour has affected

inside, noting the town was lucky a stray cigarette didn't ignite any fumes.

Nelson said she feels the Rheem Center owners' pain. Her first challenge was providing the city contact information for the affected businesses. "We started and stopped a comprehensive list of businesses in Moraga," Nelson said, adding she thinks they reached out to "99 percent" of the Rheem Center businesses.

Doing that was complicated because not all Moraga businesses are Chamber of Commerce members. Interim Town Manager Robert Priebe has received a few detour comments himself. "I understand the problems and we're working on it," Priebe said. He says the town administrators are "working very hard to find more assistance."

Addressing Somers' concern, Priebe told the Lamorinda Weekly "we are making changes." He says the town will add a sign underneath the present electronic "Rheem Boulevard closed; detour ahead" sign in Lafayette on southbound Moraga advising drivers that Rheem Center businesses remain open. The town will also post metal traffic signs in both directions along Moraga Road and Rheem Boulevard before and after the closure with the same information. Would the police department assign an officer to direct traffic through the intersection? "We're playing that by ear," Priebe said. According to Priebe the forensic analysis of the hole should be completed approximately April 15, but completion of the project will likely take another three to four months. He remains pleased with how the town is managing the event, saying "I don't think there's much more we can do to keep the public informed," and adds that the work done by Town Engineer Edric Kwan has been "phenomenal."

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