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A sign of the times



Lafayette Plaza Center's newly refurbished sign complete with functioning clock

By Vera Kochan

The Lafayette Plaza Center sign has recently undergone a face-lift, while the Moraga Shopping Center sign is following close behind. Both shopping centers were built in the early 1960s by developer Russell Bruzzone using a Spanish/ranch-style of architecture. The phrase “What’s old is new again” couldn’t be truer when applied to the retro design of the signs themselves.

Construction of Lafayette’s Plaza Center at 3500 Mt. Diablo Blvd. (between First Street and Safeway) began in 1963. The 7-acre site contained space for 20 stores. Fifteen olive trees were planted along with flowers, while a decorative water fountain completed the aesthetic appeal to shoppers. Off-street parking was a big plus for customers who had 377 spaces to choose from.

In the early days of construction, Bruzzone already had several stores under lease contracts or verbally committed agreements. Lucky’s supermarket boasted over 20,000 square feet of space (currently Whole Foods), while Top Notch (later to become McCaulou’s) took up nearly 13,000 square feet. Additional stores were: MacTavish’s Ice Cream, Nick the Barber, Guy’s Drugstore, Robert Omo’s Men’s Clothing, Imports by Hazel, Macil’s

Women’s Shop, Village Casuals, Robert Goddard Cameras, Mobile Service Station, and The Shoe Stable.

Bruzzone had hopes to fill the remaining spaces with a soda fountain/bakery, a bar and restaurant, a liquor store, a children’s store, a combination laundromat/dry cleaners and possibly a beauty salon. According to a 1963 interview with the Lafayette Sun newspaper, Bruzzone stated, “I believe that this shopping center will be one that will instill a great sense of pride in our community’s residents.”

Completed in 1964, Lafayette Plaza Center’s sister, the Moraga Shopping Center at 1450 Moraga Road, was built on land that Bruzzone purchased from the Utah Construction and Mining Company. The property that was once farmland linked by dirt roads became a go-to shopping destination for locals.

While the Safeway supermarket was one of the first stores in the Center, it was originally located in the space currently occupied by McCaulou’s. The first McCaulou’s store was located elsewhere within the center. Other stores or services original to the early days of the Moraga Shopping Center were: Moraga Shell Station, Moraga Texaco, Bill Knox Standard Station, Spanish Manor Beauty Shop, Moraga Liquors, Verde’s Evergreen

Nursery, Jack’s Barber Shop, Dr. Raymond Kan (Optometrist), Dr. William Beckner (Pediatrics), Moraga Cleaners & Laundry, Wells Fargo Bank, K’s Carousel (an ice cream parlor), Moraga Camera Shop, Wagon Wheel Delicatessen, Guy’s Moraga Drugs, Texdahl & Johnson Sporting Goods, Tipton Gifts, Grande’s Shoes and The Clothes Horse (a women’s clothing store).

Old-timers living in Lafayette or Moraga during the 1960s will mostly likely remember many of those stores that no longer occupy the current shopping centers, but with the newly spruced-up signs, it’ll seem just like yesterday.

Special thanks to Lafayette Historical Society President Mary McCosker and Lafayette Historical Society Member Michael Troutman.



Photos Vera Kochan

Moraga Shopping Center's sign is on its way to beautification with the help of a crane

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