

Group At 20: Revitalization Evolving As A Success.

Article from The Independent Newspaper

Livermore Downtown Inc. (LDI) is celebrating its 20th year as an organization, as it continues to be part of the revitalization of the downtown.

The group had a different name when it began, Livermore Main Street Project, a nod to the state agency that helped create it, with cooperation from merchants, residents and city government. The name change about four years ago hasn't diverted its mission.

Livermore's downtown redevelopment, which began before LDI, created the physical environment for the rebirth of downtown as a vibrant place with a much nicer appearance. The changes include the calming of First Street traffic by eliminating two lanes, beautification with a new fountain and grassy area near the landmark flagpole at Livermore Avenue, and sidewalk arbors, which eventually will have flowers climbing on them.

The extension of outdoor dining into flex zones, which can also be used for parking outside restaurant hours, is a nice touch, a practical way to expand the sidewalk cafe experience. One restaurant using the new area has reported a 20 percent boost in business, said Rachael Snedecor, executive director of LDI.

What makes LDI go is the cooperation between government, merchants, and residents.

Livermore had all of the components in place, including a government where revitalization is a winning city council issue, and where city manager Linda Barton had experience with redevelopment, because she served in Portland city government, said Snedecor.

Snedecor is excited about the current construction of the 500-seat performing arts center and a multiplex movie theater. That will make the downtown an entertainment center, and even pull in people from Pleasanton, who won't have to journey to "the parking lot theater in Dublin," she said. If restaurateurs cooperate by extending evening hours, it will be possible to have dinner after a show.

"The parking lot theater in Dublin" is a telling phrase. LDI is about preserving a downtown, in competition against suburban malls. It's significant that the Main Street Project in state government is under the wing of the state historic preservation committee, according to Snedecor.

One idea is to preserve old buildings downtown, as has been done with several old buildings along First Street. There is also the old look of brick in the new Blacksmith Square, on North Livermore Avenue near Railroad Avenue. Built by Mike Madden, with shops that are just now opening, it ties in with the downtown as cultural magnet. Local artisans' work is displayed at various shops there. There are two wine tasting rooms, to reinforce Livermore's noted wine country theme.

LDI sponsors the annual Wine Country Festival, its biggest fund-raiser. about 80 percent of its \$400,000 annual budget comes from the two big days, which last year drew 120,000 people.

Livermore is not all about wine. There is still the theme of The Old West, especially on Rodeo weekend. And science and technology are also important. Along those lines, downtown Livermore is now wireless. Anyone with a laptop can get on-line free, for up to two hours. The time limit is designed to make sure the service is used only by visitors, including workers who have a lunch date, but need to keep up while waiting.

The key to keeping the retail going in a healthy way is seen in a series of workshops sponsored by LDI. "If you were not doing well before, the streetscape might not be the solution," said Snedecor.

People who own restaurants can attend workshops about how to market their places. Retailers can be helped by Barbara Wold, a future featured speaker who "is a pro in window display and product display. She has all the secrets of retailing to the consumer's expectation," said Snedecor.

Merchants must have their own business plan, because LDI isn't there for that purpose. Once a merchant knows the market is there for him or her, LDI has a design team that can help with such things as color choices and sign design.

LDI conducted some marketing research of its own, with an effort called "Female focus." Snedecor assembled fifty women, in the 30 to 60 range, the demographic that does 80 percent of the shopping. She told the women to shop for what they wanted for the holiday season. "They were surprised at how much there is," said Snedecor.

As to what wasn't there, the women recorded what they had to travel to another area to buy. They were also asked such questions as "What turned you off?" It was not a scientific survey, but even better, because "we did it from the emotional standpoint," said Snedecor.

"There was no form to fill out. We were looking for the strong emotion, positive or negative. It was not a critique, but their emotions as a consumer. The one big failing so far in the mix of goods and services downtown has been the unfulfilled need for a good delicatessen. So there is an opportunity for more retailers to come into the downtown, said Snedecor.

Summing up the group's advances over the past 20 years, Snedecor said, "It has been evolution with intelligent design."