

Old Torrance faces new challenges

By Nick Green Staff Writer

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The Retros, a local classic rock band, performed in old Torrance two weeks ago to kick off a summer concert series near the recently opened Buffalo Fire Department restaurant. Local businesses hope the series will draw customers to the languishing area. (Sean Hiller Staff Photographer)

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In February 2007 Anthony Pintaudi, co-owner of A&J Antiques in Old Torrance, warned that the area was on the verge of economic meltdown.

With retailers that attract pedestrian traffic

gradually vanishing even then, he predicted a bleak landscape of empty storefronts - including his - unless some leadership emerged from City Hall.

Two years later, A&J Antiques is gone.

Pintaudi reluctantly closed his doors in March after 16 years in business at Sartori and El Prado avenues at the center of Old Town.

"We had no choice," he said. "Sales just kept going down and down. It was so difficult for us to let it go. It was a lot of our lives."

Today, the corpses of extinct businesses litter downtown.

On the block that lies cater-corner from A&J Antiques, four empty storefronts stare vacantly at the street.

Across the road, in a small second-floor office, was a violin repair shop. The owner closed his doors several months ago when business plunged.

"There's never been a problem in the past renting it out because it's such a charming place to work and live," said Bonnie Tsurudone, who recently cut the monthly rent from \$680 to \$570 for the 370-square-foot office.

"People are just thinking twice about starting a business right now," she added.

It's the same story on surrounding blocks, where

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small businesses were barely holding on even when the economy was booming. Now they are flickering out, exacerbating what appears to be a relentless downward spiral in Old Torrance.

"The retail is disappearing rapidly - there's probably only 20 percent retail left," said Royston Williams, co-owner of Antique Attic a few storefronts down from where A&J Antiques was. "Foot traffic has dwindled to nothing."

Retail businesses are seen as the glue holding Old Town together.

Window displays catch the eye of strollers, prompting them to wander in, linger and perhaps buy something.

But with more and more empty windows there are fewer and fewer reasons to walk around Old Town outside of a few thriving restaurants where customers drive up, dine and then drive away.

"It's as bad as I've ever seen it," said Bob Brandt, co-owner of the Red Car Brewery and Restaurant, which next year will mark a decade in business.

Some downtown business owners blame the city for allowing Old Torrance to drift aimlessly along for years.

Among them is Pintaudi, who said he bought into a vision for a vibrant downtown articulated by former Mayor Jim Armstrong.

"We thought there was going to be a tomorrow,"

he said. "But the city didn't care."

Downtown business owners talk of obstacles constantly put up by city officials, such as demands for more parking that simply didn't exist.

"We had to fight to come down here," said Jonathan De La Torre, co-owner of Dygital Dynamics Sign Shop, which moved to Old Torrance three years ago. "They were very concerned about our parking. They really don't want shops to come here. It wasn't a feel-good experience moving here."

Walk-in traffic had dropped noticeably in recent months, he said.

De La Torre gave up May 1 and moved his store to Riverside.

On the plus side, there's plenty of parking now on the street outside his vacant storefront.

Those businesses that remain voice familiar criticisms.

"To me they haven't done enough here," said Lonnie Martinez, co-owner of Carpets By Bernardo on Marcelina Avenue. "I would like to walk down here and think, 'Oh, it's a really cool place to hang out.'"

Two years ago, shortly after he won election as mayor, Frank Scotto pledged to put a plan in place to revitalize downtown.

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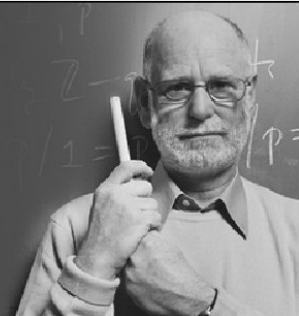


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That would come via an update of the city's strategic plan; the proposed method for implementing that plan was released in late June.

"It's one thing to say we're going to fix it," said Councilman Tom Brewer. "It's another thing to have a plan to fix it."

Brewer, who moved to Torrance at age 2 and grew up during downtown's heyday, is emerging as the latest advocate for Old Torrance.

As a kid, he remembers cycling from his north Torrance home to downtown with friends, collecting cans and bottles for spare change.

A nickel, he recalled, bought an ice cream cone at the Fosters Freeze that still stands on Cravens Avenue; an especially affluent youngster would add chocolate coating for another nickel. Yet another nickel would be enough to get into the double feature at the movie theater at the corner of Cravens and Marcelina avenues, since torn down for condominiums.

"You could spend all day downtown and most days we did," Brewer said.

In the pre-mall era it was a time when people shopped at the downtown A&P Supermarket and browsed at Levy's Department Store.

Today that picture postcard, Mayberry-like scene of bustling small-town commerce has all but disappeared in Old Torrance.

Brewer believes he has discovered a way to bring it back.

Shortly after his 2006 election to the council he wandered into a conference workshop discussing something called SmartCode.

That land development ordinance is intended to fold zoning, architectural controls, urban design and other regulations into a unified ordinance.

Under SmartCode there's no more haggling over the number of parking spaces, facades or setbacks for every proposed development.

"Conventional zoning as it has been practiced is all about saying what you cannot do," said Laura Hall, whose company, San Francisco-based Hall Alminana, was hosting the workshop Brewer walked into.

"The smart growth codes are all about do this and do that - there's very clear rules - and if you do that you'll get approved."

Putting a detailed SmartCode ordinance in place should take no longer than six to nine months from the first community meeting until the final adoption of an ordinance, Hall said.

In contrast city officials envision holding a series of community forums quarterly, beginning in the fourth quarter of this year and stretching until the second quarter of 2010.

During those nine months, ideas for "the vision of downtown" would be collected and a

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"leadership core" identified to help carry it out.

That doesn't include three years of ongoing surveys through 2012; a plan itself wouldn't be finished until June 2011 and nothing concrete would actually begin until the fall of that year.

"That's too much time," Hall said. "People just can't keep their interest level up for that long - it's actually not very kind.

"It doesn't make the public any happier, it doesn't get consensus, it does none of the things that you think it would," she added. "Tight deadlines are our friend."

Frustrated by bureaucratic fiddling while Old Town metaphorically burns, some business owners are trying to get things done - now.

A craft beer festival and arts and crafts festival dubbed the Torrance Block Party is set for Aug. 30 in Old Torrance.

Others are exploring placement of art from artist co-ops in vacant storefronts.

And Chef Michael Shafer, who owns the upscale restaurant The Depot and recently opened the Buffalo Fire Department eatery directly across Cabrillo Avenue, is holding a nine-week Saturday evening summer concert series in the courtyard outside his new venture. A small crowd turned out to see the inaugural concert by local classic rock band The Retros a couple of weeks ago.

"We don't have enough draws in the way of

commercial vendors," Shafer said. "We need to do some planned activities at nighttime to bring the community out."

But these are stopgap measures.

Fundamental change is needed - and soon.

Brewer accepts that city officials have not done enough and is unconvinced that will change without political leadership.

No city staffer is responsible for redevelopment of Old Torrance.

While the Community Services Department is nominally in charge, officials there only have the resources to react to proposals rather than seek out appropriate redevelopment avenues.

And the timeline proposed to implement any plan is far too long, Brewer said.

"We need somebody who's got a vision for downtown who can put that vision in place," he said. "I know what downtown used to be, what it can be and what it should be."

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