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Experts discuss state of retail in Lafayette

By Pippa Fisher



From left, John Cumbelich, Basil Christopoulos, Craig Semmelmeier, and Steve Cortese discuss the state of retail in Lafayette in front of the city council and planning commission at a packed meeting July 23. Photo Jeff Heyman/City of Lafayette

executive officer of John Cumbelich and Associates, and Craig Semmelmeier, founder and principal of Main Street Property Services.

Srivatsa pointed out that the four had a combined 120 years of retail experience.

The four experts agreed that, overall, Lafayette was positioned well for success based on its excellent demographics and high quality anchor tenants such as grocery stores, which draw people back to the retail area several times per week.

Semmelmeier explained that the retail power centers of the mall and the big box stores are the ones suffering today as a result of the internet, much more than Lafayette, and said there is tremendous opportunity here. "Today is the time to realize the wind is at your back," he said.

Cortese however, warned against the practice of some landlords who try to fill their spaces without consideration for quality. He pointed out that in a time when anyone can purchase anything online without leaving home, what they need to offer must be experiential. To do that the city must bring in high quality tenants. "Tenant mix is everything," Cortese said.

Of those stores that remain vacant in Lafayette, Semmelmeier said many were problematic, either because of ADA accessibility or parking issues or because they may only be qualified to be what they were before, and he suggested the need to be flexible with usage.

Cumbelich agreed. He pointed out that the narrow definition of what can go into a retail space in Lafayette precludes quasi-retail operations, such as title companies, real estate companies and dentists, which means that, for example, a vape shop goes in next to a toy store. Christopoulos pointed out that an empty property is better than a bad tenant.

All four experts concurred that in order to attract people, the downtown area has to be somewhere people want to go and spend time and to that end they recommended creating a better pedestrian experience. And all agreed that Lafayette is ideally poised to create a social environment - a village - in a way that the internet cannot.

Not surprisingly the panel raised the parking issues in Lafayette and the need to change city codes to relax parking requirements or to encourage people to open up their private parking. Cortese got a round of applause when he said that the city needs a public parking garage.

Christopoulos, however, reminded everyone that full parking lots are actually great for retail. The need is to not differentiate between uses when it comes to retail versus restaurant or service.

In summing up, Mayor Don Tatzin noted that Lafayette's great demographics are driven by the people who move here most often for the great schools - people who place education as their highest priority. "If we allow the schools to slip, it has ramifications," he said.

What is the state of retail in Lafayette and in the larger region? What is the cause of all the vacant stores in Lafayette? And how can Lafayette attract quality businesses to fill them? These were the questions posed to a panel of four commercial real estate experts at the July 23 city council meeting. Their answers touched on several considerations from high quality tenant mix to convenient parking.

The council members joined members of the planning commission to listen to the discussion of these questions moderated by City Planning and Building Services Director Niroop Srivatsa. It was standing room only at the meeting, which brought in residents and business owners from Lafayette and from farther afield in the Lamorinda area.

The panel included Steve Cortese of Cortese Real Property, whose notable local projects include the development and management of La Fiesta Square and Lafayette Mercantile, Basil Christopoulos, president of C&H Development Company, whose local properties include the Lafayette Town Center, John Cumbelich, chief

The city plans to continue the retail workshop series in the future. Meanwhile residents are encouraged to make their voices heard on the subject at www.lafayettelists.com.

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