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Lafayette Business Perspective on the Farmers' Market

By Sophie Braccini

Jay Lifson, the CEO of the Lafayette Chamber of Commerce, thinks that a farmers' market is a good idea as long as it supports "Try Lafayette First." The idea of having a farmers' market in Lafayette on the Plaza on Thursday nights has met with ambivalent reactions in the Lafayette business community.

The promoters of the market understand the demands of the local economy, and that is why a meeting was organized in Lafayette on June 23 for local merchants to express their concerns and make proposals. The market's proposed format, to stay small and include some local vendors, is getting relative support. But a market won't make life easier for local food and flower vendors.

"The meeting went pretty well," says Lifson, "the Contra Costa Certified Farmers' Market company that would manage the market is interested in making this one different and the local businesses would have an opportunity to participate."

Lifson recalls that the idea of a farmers' market has been discussed many times over the years, and that in 1991 the idea was rejected because the business community wasn't comfortable with it. "We understand that it is very good for the community," says Lifson, "it brings people to the downtown, and can have the potential to attract incremental business in the vicinity."

Merchants are concerned that the market will hurt local retailers of food and flowers. Connie Collier, the daughter of Lafayette Diablo Foods founder Ed Stokes, is torn by the issue. "We are a community market, we love and give back to Lafayette and support its choices," she said, "we support eating fresh local produce and small growers, but a farmers' market will hurt community independent businesses such as ourselves."

Asked if she would participate in the market, Collier acknowledged that the committee that is promoting the concept made them that offer but that Diablo Foods is not equipped to participate at this time. "We'll see how the pilot will go in the fall," she concluded.

The parking constraint will have to be addressed. The market would be held on the Plaza, at Mount Diablo Boulevard and Moraga Road, on Thursday evening from 4 p.m to 8 p.m. There is almost no street parking and events on the plaza typically impact either the large shopping center across Mount Diablo Boulevard or the other smaller parking area on the opposite side of Moraga Road. At the meeting Sue Jun, the owner of Open Sesame (on Moraga Rd across from the Plaza), said that when events are held on the plaza visitors use all available parking and nothing's left for her clients. CCCFM proposed to have volunteers help with parking organizing on market nights.

The merchants located on Plaza Way, the little street bordering the Plaza, are also impacted. "Market presence will certainly increase foot traffic," said Richard Yom, who owns the new Sprint store, "and if this is what the community wants, we will support it." Ziko, the owner of the Man's Barber Shop, is not concerned because he closes at 5 p.m. anyway.

For the business community, the market represents both a challenge and an opportunity. "The whole shop local to lower carbon footprint, support small farmers, is a good thing," says Lifson, "but we have to make sure that not too much money leaves our community."

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