

The 500 block: Lemongrass, Arigato, and beyond

With the opening of Lemongrass, it's time to recognize the 500 block's success. Lemongrass complements Haute Stuff; long Martinez' finest downtown restaurant. The Laotian owners are young, competent, energetic, and enthusiastic. Their fusion style has a pleasing Thai tone. With a bit of warning they'll serve a pure Laotian meal.

Across the street, Arigato has reopened. There one finds simple, elegant Japanese cuisine prepared by the husband-and-wife Hawaiian-Okinawan team. It's wonderful to see them back.

La Tapatia is a proven draw. The clientele overlaps only a bit with the other restaurants. That's good. With variety comes strength. A successful downtown must have broad appeal.

Close by in the 600 block is Bulldog BBQ, and around the corner are California Magic and Dinner. Lots of variety.

At dusk you can watch the beavers and mink. After dinner it's a short walk to the Campbell Theater (we hope it stays), or Armando's for music.

The 500 block has more than restaurants. Char's has flowers, cards, and gifts of all sorts. Luigi's has a bit of just about everything, including groceries such as the milk you remembered you needed while having dinner. For shopping and crafts there are the White Rabbit Boutique and Main Street Quilts. Plus the Studio Triskellion Beauty Salon and the Good Stuff Guitar shop. Wow!

The resurgence of the 500 block shows that downtown Martinez can work. Even in today's difficult environment. The block is a microcosm of the kind of successful urban environment

described back in 1961 by Jane Jacobs in America's best-known urban planning and renewal book: "The Death and Life of Great American Cities". Her message: build to a human scale with a range of activities so people will hang around at all hours: diversity, density and dynamism". David Suchor's "City Comforts: How to Build an Urban Village" showcases recent success stories with lots of photos.

Praise of the 500 block would be incomplete without crediting Dick Duncan. About a decade ago Dick suggested rebirthing Martinez by focusing on pedestrians and sidewalks and outdoor seating. He proposed expanding sidewalk space without losing parking by making Main Street one-way, with 'pockets'. Though 500 block businesses are still a bit divided on the merits of the one-way-with-pockets, I believe they were a key element in bringing about today's success.

What does this success mean for the City? In the near term the City needs to advertise what's happening here. As the word gets out, visitors will come. That will lead to the "500 block ambience" propagating down Main Street, resulting in a lot more successful businesses. Every one will gain.

Over the longer term Martinez needs to upgrade, enhance and expand downtown residential and commercial building stock. The industrial area west of the train station is the key. The Telfer property is the cornerstone. The location adjacent to cemetery hill makes possible multiple stories without being obtrusive or blocking views. "Jane Jacobs" design principles would place commercial shops on the ground floor with residential space above. Modern construction techniques make possible quiet, vibration-free apartments next to an increasingly active railroad corridor. The location will appeal to commuters and others with the disposable income that's essential to growing downtown.

Successful development of these properties requires there be comfortable and secure pedestrian connections with the 500 block and the train station, and thence with the entire downtown. Planning will be complex. Remediation and construction will be expensive. This means that property owners and prospective investors must be assured that the plans have the temporal stability that's possible only with strong community support.

To move forward, the city needs to articulate both vision and process. The success of the 500 block and the consensus vision articulated in the master plan suggest that the timing may - at last - be right.

For now, the 500 block shows Martinez can thrive in difficult times. Hurray!

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