

TMHA in the News

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Promotional alliance in SLO: Chorro Hill businesses carve a niche together

By Julie Lynem

They are massage therapists, pottery enthusiasts, antique furniture specialists and garden gurus. One shows independent films; another offers knitting classes at the historic Sauer Adobe while her husband sells real estate from there.

The owners of businesses clustered around a stretch of Chorro Street in San Luis Obispo are an eclectic bunch, all with their own ideas and challenges at a time of economic uncertainty. But what they have in common is a desire to lure customers to a part of downtown that is often overlooked.

“Many people go shopping on the main streets downtown, but we want to make people aware that there are businesses up and operating on Chorro Hill,” said Monica Detrick, who owns Red Hot Pottery, a paint-your-own pottery studio, with her husband, Chris. “We are all feeling like we need something to bring people down here.”

Carving a niche

Like the Garden Street and West End merchants before them, the Chorro Hill group — named for the businesses and residences located beside the San Luis Obispo Mission on Chorro Street and across from the Palm Street parking structure — hopes to carve its own niche and create an identity that will attract shoppers.

The group began meeting nearly four months ago after many of the businesses and residents looked around and “realized that times really are tough,” said Hannah Brown, a spokeswoman for the group who also does marketing for Transitions Mental Health Association, a San Luis Obispo nonprofit group. Sales from Growing Grounds, a nursery on Chorro Street, help to support Transitions.

“We wanted to think of ways to be more effective at what each person is doing and work through these issues as a group,” she said. “This is no joke; this is people’s livelihoods.”

Beautification projects — planting flowers and hanging banners — and outdoor events such as concerts or films at the mission or smaller events on the patios tucked behind the quaint shops are just a few of the potential draws, Brown said. A summer treasures sale was held at the end of last week.

However, making the neighborhood more attractive is only the first step, said Linnaea Phillips, former owner of Linnaea’s Café on Garden Street. Phillips has spoken to the Chorro Street merchants about her efforts as part of a Garden Street business coalition in the early 1980s. Back then, Garden Street merchants held street festivals, strung lights in the trees, installed flower boxes and attempted to make the sidewalks wider. At one point, Cal Poly students were even invited to redesign the street, Phillips said.

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The Chorro shop owners have to create “an experience” for people, she said, and tie what they’re doing in to other neighborhood businesses. She suggested, for instance that business owners entertain the idea of opening during Palm Theater movie times to grab the attention of customers.

Above all, she said owners need to consider if what they have for sale is what people want to buy.

“The right businesses selling the right goods can make any business work,” she said.

Promoting the group

For the Chorro Hill businesses, promoting the neighborhood now is particularly important given the Chinatown project, which could get under way as early as next spring.

The Chinatown project is proposed as a retail, hotel and residential development that will take up three quarters of the block between Morro, Palm, Chorro and Monterey streets.

Two San Luis Obispo businesses, Photography 101 on Monterey Street and Costume Capers on Chorro Street, moved out last year after Copeland Properties told them to relocate, citing earthquake safety concerns. Chorro business owners said the vacancies have left a void.

But Deborah Cash, executive director of San Luis Obispo’s Downtown Association, said it’s smart that Chorro Street business owners are “looking ahead.”

“They know this (Chinatown) is going to happen and they’re thinking, ‘What can we do to prepare ourselves?’ ” Cash said. “I think they’re very proactive and astute.”

Cash is encouraged by the Chorro Hill effort, saying that she believes the location, with its convenient parking and proximity to the church, is a destination people will want to return to time and again.

“They need to bring people from the Palm Street parking structure,” she said. “That’s really a customer base they need to attract.”

Kim Kelly, owner of Bliss Body Spa & Salon since 2008, said she’s willing to do whatever it takes to thrive.

“Business is great, but it can always be better,” she said. “I feel very blessed to be able to pay bills; a lot of people cannot even do that.”

Kelly has “no idea what tomorrow holds,” but she has faith in her fellow business owners.

“What I can do by myself is nothing compared to what I can do with all of the other merchants,” she said. “Being able to promote each other is just good business.”