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SERVING TIBURON, BELVEDERE AND STRAWBERRY SINCE 1973

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It is no secret to local residents that Tiburon offers one of the last bastions of “mom and pop” shops in Marin County. From Jeanie’s Java on the Boardwalk to Citrus boutique on Main Street, downtown offers an array of eclectic shops without a chain store in sight. The town is easily walkable, the views of San Francisco are unbeatable, and the village-like ambience makes Tiburon a special place for tourists and locals alike.

We decided to go out and take a closer look at the businesses of downtown Tiburon – what they are, who owns them, what they think of doing business in Tiburon, and how locals feel about the downtown scene.

A survey of 120 Tiburon businesses completed in August of this year revealed some interesting facts: fewer than half (48) of Tiburon’s businesses are locally owned or run; male owners outnumber female owners by about two to one; about seven percent are owned by couples and less than six percent are owned by corporations. The largest category of employment in Tiburon is professional services, including legal and accounting (47), followed by retail shops (36) and restaurants (17). Fifty-two of the businesses that responded to the survey say that the majority of their customers are residents, compared with 66 businesses who claim that the majority of their customers are tourists and/or greater Bay Area residents.

While many local business owners and managers surveyed were satisfied with the way things were going downtown, others expressed concern over issues such as parking, the need for better advertising or marketing, and a lack of support from the

Chamber of Commerce.

According to one downtown storeowner, who wished to remain anonymous, the town needs to make a better effort to support local businesses. “Town officials need to recognize that the retail business community is an important part of their town and be more supportive. Overly aggressive parking enforcement, for example, does not create a friendly retail environment.”

Other storeowners compared Tiburon with Mill Valley, which has seen a revitalization over the past few years and now offers a variety of distinctive boutiques and restaurants, and a bustling nightlife.

“We need to make Tiburon a more vital town, like Mill Valley,” claims John Rooney, owner of Rooney’s Café & Grill on Main Street. “And we should create more of a nighttime atmosphere.”

Part of the problem, according to a number of local merchants, is the difficulty of starting a business in Tiburon.

“The council and the permit process is necessary but very business unfriendly” claims the owner of a downtown hair salon. “For anyone who is trying to get street traffic and new business, it is not easy. Franchises or chains are not welcome here, mostly just small, entrepreneurial businesses.”

Many, including lawyer Ronald Goldman of the Goldman Law Firm on Main Street, feel that Tiburon needs to stop restricting business. “It would be nice to have a Starbucks or a Peet’s nearby,” he added.

Several other business owners agreed, and were not necessarily opposed to the availability of upscale food retailers, even if they are considered “chain stores.” They mentioned the need for “more casual dining” options where storeowners and employees could grab a quick, healthy lunch without having to sit down for a long wait.

Another issue at the top of merchants’ minds was the need for more, and more easily accessible, parking. Ideas on how to remedy the situation varied. Some felt that easier access to the Playhouse parking lot at the end of Main Street would solve the problem; others felt that better street parking was the answer. Some proposed more free parking, and a few even mentioned the idea of a parking structure.

“Two-hour parking right around the stores would make a big difference for the retailers,” according to Pamela Schuyler-Cowens, owner of Yoga 1-on-1 on Main Street.

“More parking, and more reasonable rates in parking lots, would help downtown merchants,” said Amy Kemper, owner of

Fitness of Tiburon, located in Point Tiburon Plaza.

Business owners were not the only ones eager to put in their two cents about downtown. Residents of the Tiburon Peninsula have their own opinions about Tiburon businesses, and what they would like to see downtown.

Most residents are in agreement that the geographical beauty of downtown Tiburon cannot be surpassed.

“Spending time in downtown Tiburon, especially Shoreline Park, reminds me why we love this town so much,” commented Meg Abbott who is raising her two young children here.

While Abbott admitted that Tiburon has some great restaurants and shops, many of which are overlooked, she says that she would like to see better quality stores overall. “There are a lot of shops that cater to out-of-area tourists, which is understandable. But I would love to see our downtown evolve more toward the Mill Valley model, as opposed to the Sausalito model.”

Jennifer Barnes says that she loves Tiburon for the friendly people and great views, but would like to see it turn into more of a gathering place for Tiburon community and families. “Maybe Sundays [could be] picnic days on the waterfront with restaurants offering easy to-go meals or outdoor bags,” she said. “Friday nights [could offer] happy hours for the adults with live music at different restaurants.”

Most locals agree that they would like to see Tiburon stores more focused on residents, not tourists. In an informal survey of 17 Tiburon locals, two people claimed to be “very pleased” with downtown Tiburon businesses, including shops and restaurants; nine were “somewhat pleased;” and the remaining six were “not at all pleased.”

One long-time Tiburon resident expressed her frustration with downtown: “Downtown Tiburon has disappointed me in many ways,” explained the local. “Aside from its beautiful aesthetic appeal, many of the retail shops are dated and the restaurants deliver poor service. I have lived in Tiburon for 30 years and aside from Waters Edge, nothing has changed. Meanwhile, towns like Mill Valley and Larkspur have flourished with up-and-coming eateries and appealing vendors...it’s time for Tiburon to let go of the past.”

Another local, who wished to remain anonymous, said that she chooses to shop and eat in downtown Mill Valley rather than Tiburon. She said that Citrus and Papparazzi were the only stores that drew her to Main Street. “I wish Starbucks had opened down there; I would go downtown every day.”

Of local residents surveyed, fewer than half patronized downtown businesses twice a week or more. The stores most frequented include Bell Market, Boardwalk Market, the Tiburon Playhouse, Paradise Ice Cream and Waypoint Pizza.

When asked what would entice them to patronize downtown shops and restaurants more often, locals had an array of responses.

“I’d probably spend more time downtown if the shops got up with the times and started catering to the people who live here,” said one young mother who grew up in Belvedere and is now raising her kids in Tiburon.

According to Andra Martens, easier access to shops would lure her downtown on a more regular basis.

“I would get my coffee downtown, but Caffe Acrican can only get foot traffic,” lamented Martens. “I’d also like to see Tiburon wean out all of the nonsense T-shirt and trinket shops along the north side of Main Street, and add some more good restaurants, clothing stores, home design stores and a great wine and cheese shop with a wine bar.”

High on the other locals’ wish lists for downtown Tiburon? A drugstore with full-service pharmacy, more kid-friendly restaurants, a children’s clothing store, a bookstore/café, and more upscale, trendy clothing stores.

When asked to comment on residents’ dissatisfaction with downtown, Kevin Bryant, Advance Planner for the Town of Tiburon, explained, “Promoting resident-serving uses has been a goal of the town’s since the 1970’s and is part of the current General Plan adopted in 1989.

“This is not a new idea,” said Bryant. “The town’s role is to look at proposals for new uses, especially in the surge of development expected in coming years along Tiburon Boulevard, and make sure that tourist uses are strongly discouraged.”

The town is less concerned about promoting resident-serving uses along Ark Row and Main Street, admitted Bryant.

Although the town has final approval over the businesses that open downtown, commercial property owners have a large say about which merchants they will lease space to. As long as the merchant’s business adheres to the necessary zoning requirements, the town will typically approve.

Still, according to Bryant, there are cases where residents can speak out about which stores open downtown. “Whenever a change of use permit is required,” explains Bryant, “there is a public hearing and residents are invited to come voice their opinions before the town approves the use.” By “change of use,” Mr. Bryant is referring to a restaurant becoming a retail shop, for example.

According to Steve Sears, vice-president of the Tiburon Peninsula Chamber of Commerce and owner of Sam’s Anchor Café on Main Street, the chamber has been totally revamped over the past two years and is dedicated to revitalizing downtown Tiburon.

“We have a lot of new marketing people on board at the chamber who are willing to do the footwork and get things moving,” said Sears. “Currently, the chamber is trying to get funding to back a marketing plan that would focus on attracting more upscale, resident-serving merchants.”

The key to attracting these merchants, according to Sears, is to show a healthy market of local and Bay Area customers. “Merchants want to see a viable business community before they open a store,” explained Sears.

The bottom line? Whether you are for or against change in downtown Tiburon, residents do have a chance to be heard. Check *The Ark* for upcoming public hearings and put in your two cents about what stores you would like, or not like, to see downtown.