



AUSTIN WALSH/DAILY JOURNAL

Members of the Burlingame community gathered to discuss ways to rejuvenate the city's popular shopping districts at a meeting April 17.

Downtown Burlingame business woes weighed

Locals identify opportunities to stimulate city's retail industry

By Austin Walsh

DAILY JOURNAL STAFF

Seeking to stem the rise of storefront vacancies amidst a changing retail landscape, merchants, landlords and residents brainstormed methods to rejuvenate Burlingame's popular shopping districts.

During the Burlingame Talks Shop seminar held Wednesday, April 17, in the Masonic Lodge, community members examined opportunities to help Burlingame Avenue and Broadway remain com-

petitive in the age of online shopping.

Loosened zoning regulations, reimagined retail spaces, parking constraints and new business opportunities were among the initiatives which received the most attention from the crowd of about 100 members of the business community.

"We want to see what we can do to attract new businesses and keep the vibrancy in Burlingame," said Mayor Donna Colson, detailing the task before a panel of commercial real estate and business

experts hosted a conversation regarding changes in the retail industry.

With more shoppers abandoning brick-and-mortar stores in favor of taking their business to the internet, the transition is apparent in Burlingame's primary shopping districts where empty storefronts are sprouting up with greater frequency.

The most notable vacancies are large spaces left by the exit of national brands such as J. Crew and

See **RETAIL**, Page 19

RETAIL

Continued from page 1

Anthropologie, which departed recently from the high-end shopping destination along Burlingame Avenue.

While the lingering unoccupied locations fuel concerns among some that a retail store apocalypse is imminent, local commercial real estate experts maintained a more measured view.

Julie Taylor, a retail broker with Colliers International, said the notable companies which historically would lease the entirety of a large storefront are often no longer seeking assets with such high overhead.


So rather than focus on one retailer, Taylor, who is shopping the J. Crew site to interested tenants, said she pivoted to find two, smaller companies which would share the space.

Such partnerships are growing in popularity as retailers limit storefronts and narrow their emphasis to a tailored customer experience in exchange for the antiquated one-stop-shop approach.

"There is a real massive shift in who wants what type of space," Taylor said.

Also rising in popularity to fill empty storefronts are co-working spaces such as the sorts arranged by WeWork or other competitors accommodating small companies or entrepreneurs looking for professional office space without the burden of leasing a building or floor.

Amy Feldman, program director with the All Good Work Foundation, said co-working arrangements have paid dividends also by populating empty storefronts and maximizing the space's usefulness for a wider swath of



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the local economy.

Finally, co-working spaces offer the added benefit of drawing lots of new people to central destinations, said Feldman, who noted the employees would likely patronize surrounding merchants, eateries and shops.

Taylor noted another increasingly effective means of attracting shoppers downtown are popular fitness clubs, similar to the Barry's Bootcamp high-intensity training outlet which opened recently on Howard Avenue.

Club clientele are desirable shoppers to occupy downtown because they are often dedicated, able to afford pricey memberships, image conscious and inclined to spend time cooling down after a workout by window shopping or grabbing a drink and bite to eat nearby.

"If it's the right opportunity, it's a fantastic amenity," said Taylor, of the fitness club presence.

Recognizing the industry's rapid growth, city officials recently discussed allowing the exercise clubs to open up shop along Burlingame Avenue, where they are currently barred from operating.

While no formal direction was offered, more generally the concept of loosened zoning and development regulations around commercial corridors

and shopping districts was identified as a key opportunity for stimulating the local economy.

Commercial real estate developer Ryan Guibara pushed hard for officials to cut the red tape which can be a costly hurdle for businesses to overcome when considering their future in Burlingame — a sentiment received with applause from the crowd.

And while much of the two-hour discussion was reserved for ideas to stimulate the local economy, some time was kept for the identifying the potential pratfalls associated with drawing more businesses and shoppers to Burlingame.

Most common among the criticisms of the downtown shopping environment currently is a lack of available parking, and some merchants feared attracting certain shoppers, such as those patronizing fitness clubs, would only compound the issue.

Merchants recognized the lack of parking as well as high rents as some of the most significant obstacles they have encountered, while residents meanwhile desired a new entertainment and nightlife venue.

To that end, the request for businesses specializing in offering a unique experience that can be shared among friends and family aligns with another rising trend among successful retailers.

Restaurateur John Scarcella, who operates both Centro Pizza and Sapore in Burlingame, partially attributed his success to the high touch offered to diners at his eateries while suggesting such an experience is essential to the sustainability of retailers and independent business amidst a changing marketplace.

Scarcella urged business owners to give shoppers more than just an opportunity to make a purchase because he said "if it's only about buying, they can do that online."