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# Downtown becomes test of leadership for City Hall

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*THE PRESS DEMOCRAT*

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After 73 years and four generations, Traverso's will no longer be a downtown Santa Rosa institution. The Italian food and wine shop that is so much a part of the downtown's history is moving to the hilltop enclave of Fountaingrove.

No one can say that the Traverso family didn't try to stay downtown. For a long time, the store endured more than its share of adversities, trapped between the twin fortresses -- the abandoned AT&T building and the Santa Rosa Plaza. For architecture conducive to foot traffic, you will have to look elsewhere.

When people complained about the bad actors turning up at the downtown transit mall, city officials didn't police the bad actors. They moved the transit mall from Old Courthouse Square to the Traversos' front yard. (Here was a decision that said a lot about the city's attitude toward transit in those days: Move it out of sight and out of mind.)

The Traversos' decision follows by 18 months the decision by Santa Rosa Junior College to abandon plans to build and operate a culinary arts school as part of the proposed food and wine center at Railroad Square. SRJC officials waited and waited, but time is money. Finally, their obligation was to the college and its students.

City officials try to put a happy face on these events, but they are what they are -- setbacks for efforts to re-invent the downtown while there is still time.

As it happens, a team of urban design experts was here this past week to talk about ways to rejuvenate downtown. The visit, sponsored by the Mayors' Institute on City Design, was arranged by Mayor Bob Blanchard, a 2007 graduate of the program. Sadly, Blanchard died only four weeks before the scheduled visit.

Maurice Cox, the NEA's design director, a former mayor of Charlottesville, Va., and a professor of architecture at the University of Virginia, promised his team would deliver findings that would "raise the bar" for Santa Rosa.

And so it did. Among other things, the panel recommended raising taxes and parking fees to finance downtown improvements.

Ideas don't fail because they are too big, Cox told city leaders, they fail because they are too small.

Santa Rosans have been down this road before. There have been other official visits, other blue-ribbon studies, other committees, other worthy recommendations.

This is not the first panel of experts to recommend a core area renaissance that begins with reuniting Old Courthouse Square, building walkable streetscapes, embracing art and creating vibrant public spaces.

But Santa Rosans are still waiting for the long-promised reunification of the square. They are still waiting for the redesign of the Santa Rosa Plaza. They are still waiting for something to be done about the old AT&T building. And they are still waiting for the mixed-use developments that will demonstrate how downtown can be transformed.

Traverso's and Santa Rosa Junior College couldn't afford to wait any longer.

How does a city put aside previous disappointments and move forward?

It is always said that money is lacking to reunite Old Courthouse Square, underwrite new mixed-use projects, or support a new cultural arts center in the downtown.

But the current economic uncertainties can't be a permanent excuse. When times are good, other cities find the determination and energy to move beyond talk and promises.

Two weeks ago, I wrote about Portland's success in re-inventing old neighborhoods. Mention Portland to anyone who has visited lately, and the response is always the same: Isn't that a great town?

It is easy to duck responsibility by saying that Portland is a much larger town, but that also means Portland was dealing with far bigger obstacles -- how about blocks and blocks of abandoned warehouses? -- than any obstacles confronting Santa Rosa.

Portlanders decided that the rejuvenation of old neighborhoods was better for their town's well-being than miles and miles of sprawl development.

"Much of what attracts us to suburban neighborhoods doesn't work anymore," Boston urban design expert David Dixon told a Santa Rosa City Hall forum on Friday.

Some Santa Rosans view the downtown as a place that doesn't matter in terms of the community's overall prosperity.

But if you think the value of your property five miles from the city center isn't affected by the reputation of the downtown, you would be wrong. As a place to do business as well as a place to visit, every town is judged by the vitality of its city center.

It's the downtown that defines who we are as a community.

"It can't be overestimated how much public spaces (such as Old Courthouse Square) mean to a community," said New York City landscape architect Barbara Wilks. "This is your major statement about yourself."

Santa Rosa is coming to the time when Santa Rosans must decide whether a vibrant downtown is important to them.

Cox of the NEA said cities can be transformed in a decade.

What Santa Rosa will look like a decade from now will be determined by whether city leaders embrace big ideas and ask others to do the same.

Footnote: In addition to the urban design experts visiting Santa Rosa last week, a delegation from the American Institute of Architects Center for Communities by Design will be visiting Windsor between Aug. 11 and Aug. 13. The AIA team will focus on land-use innovations along a 4-mile corridor of Old Redwood Highway.

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