

Community Builds A Vision For The Future Of Retail Downtown

■ By **ASHLEIGH OLDLAND**
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The Downtown Long Beach Associates (DLBA) is hard at work developing what its members call a “cohesive, collaborative and market-based retail vision and strategy” for Downtown Long Beach.

The DLBA coordinated two public Retail Visioning meetings to collect ideas from business owners, residents and public officials and discuss what the community would like to see in the future for downtown as it relates to commercial tenancy.

The goal of the Retail Visioning, says DLBA Vice President Kristopher Larson, is to create a community-driven plan that will guide retail recruitment for the next five years.

“The community-driven element is absolutely imperative, because there was so much misconception about how the retail market operates,” Larson explains. “We really needed to get everybody on the same page as it relates to retail recruitment and make sure that we can develop an attainable strategy that really helps to highlight the roles and responsibilities for all the different actors involved in the game.

“One of the challenges and frustrations here locally is that different industries cross over a little too much, and there’s no real outline for who does what so that we can operate collaboratively and cooperatively towards achieving a goal.”

The first Retail Visioning meeting drew about 70 participants, and the second meeting attracted more than 100 people. Attendees worked in small and large groups to share their concerns, praise and ideas for improving three downtown areas: the waterfront, the East Village and the central core of Pine Avenue and The Promenade.

“Getting input from the residents and the business owners shows that the DLBA cares,” says Varouj Shekerdeman, owner of 4th St. Deli, 450 Pine Ave. “They want to listen and they want to care.”

Shekerdeman says the best suggestions at the meeting involved recruiting “anchor tenants” on Pine Avenue. Also, he proposed decorating vacant storefronts and extending the holiday lighting on Pine Avenue from 3rd Street up to 6th Street or 7th Street.

Shekerdeman says he had hoped to see more retailers at the meetings, noting that there were more residents than retail business owners.

On the other end of the spectrum is John Morris of Bouchees Bistro at Smooth’s, 144 Pine Ave., who chose not to attend the Retail Visioning meetings.

“I’ve been to the last 20 years of meetings like this, and it’s all the same,” Morris says. “I know what needs to be done. I’ve heard it all before. I’ve got a business to run.

“I am in the restaurant business,” he adds. “We work at night. So to go to these meetings for three hours and listen to these things over and over and over . . . the businesspeople have heard it and heard it and heard it.”

Even though Morris didn’t attend the meetings, he says he hopes that the Retail Visioning project is successful in improving Downtown Long Beach.

Larson reports that the DLBA collected more than 200 different ideas for the downtown vision, as well as more than 350 strategies for implementing that vision.

A draft of the vision statement was compiled and presented at the second Retail Visioning meeting:

“It is 2015, and Downtown Long Beach is riding a wave of accelerating urban renewal through progressive investments that positions it as an international trading post that smartly blends metropolitan style with bohemian sensibility. Arts, culture and entertainment are the backbone of the city’s vibrancy. A new attention to the design of the public realm encourages all streets to strike a balance between the car, pedestrian and bicycle. Downtown’s authenticity stands out amongst West Coast communities – its buildings, both historic and modern, convey permanence and intention while its people offer a sense of charm and approachability.

“This safe and clean downtown neighborhood continues to grow, and families, couples, and singles with higher spending power are pushing and expanding the boundaries of the retail market. Residents of Long Beach, its neighboring cities and visitors from afar are flocking to the waterfront, the East Village, and downtown’s central core – Pine Avenue, The Promenade, and Long Beach Boulevard. The presence of students, out-of-town visitors

and an expanded creative workforce are filling downtown shops, restaurants and sidewalks.

“By featuring a product mix with a multicultural appeal, many of the new retail offerings effectively reinforce Long Beach’s reputation as an international city and complement its strong cultural events and attractions. The market has struck a harmonic balance between independent and national businesses, and downtown residents of all backgrounds are able to fill most of their everyday needs without leaving their neighborhood. With its blending of eclectic shops, boutiques, entertainment, nightlife and dining uses, downtown offers a unique tapestry of experiences that are distinctly Long Beach.”

The DLBA and a 16-member steering committee, which is composed of business owners, city staff, councilmembers, redevelopment agency representatives and residents, will be organizing, prioritizing and putting together a final vision statement and action strategy based on the community’s recommendations.

Larry Black, owner of The Varden Hotel, 335 Pacific Ave., attended both Retail Visioning meetings and says he thinks they were successful in bringing different community groups together to exchange ideas about downtown.

Black is hopeful that the ideas compiled at the meeting come to fruition and help realize the community’s vision of a successful downtown retail environment.

Larson, who spearheaded the Retail Visioning effort, says he is pleased with the community turnout at the meetings and is excited to see what such passionate community involvement can do for the downtown.

“This is a plan for the community to hold and keep,” Larson says. “This isn’t a city effort. This isn’t a DLBA effort. While the DLBA is driving the bus, at the end of the day it is really about encouraging the entire community to get on board and recognize that we all have a role to play in making sure the vision becomes a reality.”

The next Retail Visioning meeting is scheduled from 6-8 p.m. on March 4 at First Congregational Church, 241 Cedar Ave. The DLBA will present the final draft of the vision statement as well as action strategies. For more information about the meeting, call 562/436-4259 or e-mail vanessam@dlba.org.

For more information about the DLBA or Retail Visioning, or to watch videos of the public meetings, visit <http://downtownlbbusiness.com/learn/news>. ■