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Moragans just aren't ready for a bustling downtown

By **Randolph Tom**

The holiday season has passed and all of the East Coast visitors have departed the Lamorinda area with many gifts and memories.

Most of the New York relatives greatly appreciate the calm and serenity that engulfs Moraga's peaceful environment while others need some hustle and bustle. But, the holiday season also brings out the necessitated addiction to shop in most everyone.

When quizzed by iPod-seeking relatives yearning for satisfaction, I directed them to the Orinda BART station to go to my adopted hometown. They were saddened, however, by the news that there was nowhere to buy an iPod in Moraga.

They queried in astonishment, "They must have something downtown?!" As my better half explained, "There is no downtown in Moraga." Nor an uptown for that matter. From a Manhattanite's point of view, there are always clear delineations of areas; there is an uptown, midtown and downtown that is common knowledge to all those educated.

Why there is no downtown in Moraga is understandably dictated by the geographical locations or distance of the town's two shopping centers.

While each center has its charm of empty storefronts, they together do not make a single downtown. I'm not sure that bothers most residents of Moraga (other than the sight of unleased stores).

I know that the Planning Commission is feverishly studying the various alternatives to improve the Rheem Center in an attempt to create a downtown feel. Truth be told, the only real downtown this side of the Caldecott is in Walnut Creek, where one can roam from store to store with abandon to incur one's indebtedness.

The notion of downtown comes in the form of an area where you can drive to or walk around in a short period of time. What would probably help the powers that be to establish the downtown feeling sought in Moraga would be the housing of an attractive place to obtain much needed non-Safeway groceries, like a Trader Joe's, or another anchor tenant of some stature, like a Banana Republic (a Victoria's Secret gets my vote) or its equivalent.

Having such a national enterprise, a known anathema to the souls of Moragans who fought bitterly against the inclusion of Blockbuster and OSH into the neighborhood, is questionable. Unfortunately for those of us with progressive thought (and interest in a healthy business tax base), many residents in Moraga are steadfast in retaining the 1970s look to the community.

Alas, what is quaint to some is just plain old to others. Of course, you can take this viewpoint with a grain of salt, as it comes from a fella who gets excited gazing at the high-rises and skyscrapers in Honolulu.

In any event, I think it would be great if one had access to a number of things which would bring more of a city-type atmosphere to Moraga. I am certain that I hold a minority view regarding this point.

Although I earned my cash as a youngster shining shoes, on a professional basis I can't get that kind of service effectively from my kids nor here in Moraga. It would be in everyone's best interest if Moraga's "downtown" could support a shoe repair store, bookstore, sporting goods store or an upscale bakery where I can get my favorite mother-in-law her morning scones. I am fascinated that the community can patronize sufficiently seven gas stations, but you can't buy a non-Nation's apple-pie except at the now much-beloved Moraga farmers' market.

A downtown in Moraga that possessed the opportunity to get the banking, baking and buying of essential stuff would be welcomed with the joyous thunder equal to the fallen tree that graced my front lawn on New Year's Eve.

For now, however, while progress remains uncontrollably slow, the enjoyment of life in Moraga is still quite clear without the glistening benefits expressed in Petula Clark's 1965 hit "Downtown."

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