

As times change, downtowns in Glendora, San Dimas wrestle with identity

By Daniel Tedford, Staff Writer

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The City of San Dimas and the San Dimas Chamber of Commerce is working to improve the image and growth of the cities' down town area. (SGVN/Staff Photo by Eric Reed)

SAN DIMAS - While historic shopping districts in Monrovia and Claremont are the envy of the foothill suburbs, leaders in Glendora and San Dimas are trying to steal a little attention for their downtowns.

In Glendora, there's a general feeling among business owners that the quarter-mile strip on Glendora Avenue north of Foothill Boulevard is moving in the right direction.

Businesses are planning a marketing campaign, the city recently approved a rooftop dining project in one location and the area offers nightlife with music and food.

In San Dimas, however, the smaller downtown is more in flux. After nearly 35 years with a western theme, the City Council may relax a requirement that businesses along Bonita Avenue keep the "frontier" theme.

Some San Dimas downtown business owners say the area is too small and lacks shops to draw foot traffic. What's more, citizens and city officials alike want a large restaurant to move into the area.

"We are very limited in terms of ... being a destination," San Dimas Wine Shop owner Heidi Daniels said. "We have been able to attract clientele, but it hasn't been because of other businesses. They come here and then go home or go to other places."

It's common for Southern California cities to struggle to market historic downtown areas, said David Huntoon, a fellow at the Rose Institute in Claremont.

Other cities have found success in efforts to revive downtown areas.

"My off-the-top answer is, look at what Monrovia did and do the best you can to replicate it," Huntoon said.

Historic districts give a city an identity.

Some cities, such as Brea and Rancho Cucamonga, have created historic-looking areas that mimic old downtowns.

"You see an effort to duplicate, this tells you that this downtown thing is an attraction people understand and want," he said.

But such areas have their challenges.

Century-old buildings can't accommodate some modern retailers. Getting everyone on the same page is also an obstacle.

"Last year we had a citywide idea gathering session. One that has most people concerned is the buildings we have in downtown are too small to be viable retail spaces," said San Dimas Chamber of Commerce President Ted Powl, who would like to see some renovation and redevelopment. "The challenge is the buildings are all individually owned."

In San Dimas, visitors can go shopping for antiques, visit the Train Shop and buy home-improvement wares from the hardware store.

But merchants in the 100 block of Bonita Avenue usually close up at night.

In addition, questions have surfaced recently about the city's frontier theme



Ted Powl, President of the San Dimas Chamber of Commerce is working to improve the image and growth of the cities' down town area, Friday, Nov. 4, 2009. (SGVN/Staff Photo by Eric Reed) and viability of the area.

Powl believes something has to give. The mix of shops isn't thriving, he said.

Growth may be the only option, he said.

"That is going to cause us to really look at the retail mix in the community and move from an antique-based downtown to a retail base that addresses things other than antiques," Powl said.

There's no telling how the community would react to any expansion of the downtown, he said.

"It is a little too much for people to deal with," he said.

And while the city recently proposed allowing some of the shops to do away with frontier-themed signs, doing away with the theme is unlikely.

"The whole identity of the city is pointed in that direction," Councilman Denis Bertone said.

"Claremont has the colleges, this frontier early American theme gives San Dimas a little identity."

But themes aren't always an asset, said USC professor and marketing expert Ira Kalb.

"Tourists might be interested, fascinated by cowboys and western things, but once you go to one or two places (shops), it might not be enough," Kalb said. "People are attracted to an area because it gives them something they can't get somewhere else. It has got to be some big benefit."

Huntoon of the Rose Institute agreed.

"Monrovia doesn't have a theme," he said.

One thing experts do agree on as a good unifying element for downtowns is a business improvement district.

The districts form a committee and are funded through an additional charge on business licenses. Theme or not, with a business improvement district experts say marketing becomes easier and more effective.

Which is one of the reasons why Glendora Councilman Gene Murabito is feeling good about where downtown Glendora is going.

"I have lived in Glendora my whole life and I can never remember a point in time where there was so much activity," Murabito said.

Glendora's downtown, on Glendora Avenue just north of Foothill Boulevard, is larger than San Dimas', has various restaurants and plans to grow.

In order to stay with the times, Glendora's downtown has to bring in new stores and business that match what people are looking for, said Fred Sparling, owner of Classic Coffee in downtown Glendora and boardmember for the business improvement district.

The city has already added a little nightlife with T-Phillips bar and restaurant. New high-end shops like Fiorina have also been added to the mix.

"It may not always be things that are antique or historic looking," Sparling said. "I think, really, the old-fashion feel people are looking for is not in the buildings, but in the attitude and helpfulness from the service."

It is the balance between maintaining their history and style, paired with a progressive mix of stores, that will allow downtowns to survive, Sparling said.

"Downtowns are dying out, but I think people are getting tired of the box stores and the malls," Sparling said. "The ones that are surviving are going to do very well. In the long run, I think we are going to be the merchant of choice for a lot of people."

One of the obstacles ahead for Glendora is marketing a new style of downtown that appeals to those who want to shop, eat, and hang out. The goal is to have residents and neighbors to consider the downtown as a vibrant and viable place to go.

"I think what is required is you have to bring in the types of businesses that people want to go to," Murabito said. "Once you bring in that type of market, people are naturally are going to go there."

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