



MY BEST SHOT

by Lisa Ross

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TIME FOR A TOWN CENTER REDESIGN

Ask people in Carmel Valley or Del Mar Heights where they grocery shop or grab a quick lunch, and the answer is the Carmel Valley Town Center or Piazza Carmel. Ask them where they hang out—anywhere else.

Carmel Valley's euphemistically named Town Center shopping mall is at once a blazing commercial success because of its great shopping, eating and movie establishments, and a crashing neighborhood failure.

It's so much a success that homeGrocer.com trucks roam the streets with increasing frequency as people find ways to avoid the parking nightmare—and the ennui of the place.

City planners around the country are re-examining their suburban neighborhoods, looking for ways to reintroduce the oldest new idea: the town center as a center of town. Folks who come from other parts of the country might remember those public spaces with some nostalgia, places where people walk, shop, chat and snack.

Most people living in Del Mar and Carmel Valley would be shocked to read the Carmel Valley Community Plan, written in 1975. A visionary document designed well before today's "smart growth" planning fads, the Town Center was described as "the singular most important land use element of the plan... the focal point of the entire community, and should provide social, cultural and recreational needs as well as the shopping function."

But, the shopping center was built with its back to the splendid library and Community Park with a yawning Towns Gate Drive serving as a pedestrian barrier. And

if proposals now streaming through the city's pipeline are any indication, more of the same is planned within the next five years.

A four-acre police station and maintenance yard is in the works, sited next to the Community Park. Both will be walled-off from the library by a 500-unit apartment building. And, the planned Town Center expansion will be sadly just another uncreative retail pod with its back to Del Mar Heights Road.

Anne Harvey, a long-time Carmel Valley Planner and landscape architect, wants everyone to stop, look and listen before Carmel Valley becomes one more place that isn't a place.

As Harvey told an attentive San Diego City Planning Commission several weeks ago, we should not move forward with the final plans for the center of Carmel Valley without a comprehensive plan for these last open lots that might better serve the community and the businesses serving the area.

Building a European-style landscaped pathway down the center of Townsgate with retail businesses and an outdoor café's facing the street at the shopping center, adding ballfields to the community park and using a mixed-use design similar to La Jolla for the apartment complex are among several ideas under discussion.

While the very commercial success of the existing Town Center provides little incentive for the current out-of-town owners to entertain visionary ideas, hope springs eternal in the heart of the untiring Anne Harvey. With any luck, she can convince city planners and property owners to finally build a there, here.