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Panel examines state of downtown retail in second city-led workshop

By Pippa Fisher



Panel of Lafayette business owners discuss the state of downtown retail Oct. 22. From left: Ford Andrews, Connie Collier, Larry Blodgett and Jennifer Perlmutter. Photo Jeff Heyman/City of Lafayette

by asking what challenges the panel members face as business operators. The responses included a shortage of qualified labor, a lack of convenient parking, the high costs of rent and tenant improvement and, for some more than others, the effect of the internet on business.

As for the positives of doing business in the city, all agreed that customer loyalty and an affluent demographic were strong pluses in Lafayette.

Blodgett pointed out that although his product could be bought online, "We are unique in service. People want to shop locally," he said.

"What can the city do to help?" asked Srivatsa. "I would love to see the Happy Valley Shopping Center remodeled," answered Collier. Perlmutter agreed and made the point that some blocks, such as the one that used to be home to the Rustic Tavern, lack beauty and need external improvement. She urged the city to consider encouragement of arts and culture downtown.

Blodgett raised the question of zoning, saying there is a need to streamline city processes, loosen zoning restrictions and create a synergy between businesses and retail.

But it was Ford who answered both the question of how the city can help, and Srivatsa's final question regarding their vision for the city in the future with his comment on making the downtown more pedestrian-friendly.

Council Member Ivor Samson made the point that, in order to create a pedestrian-friendly environment, Lafayette needs unique retailers to offer places that pedestrians want to go. Ford agreed and said that filling empty spots with the right tenants would be one of the several components of the solution, along with having more lighting to make the city more night-friendly for pedestrians.

Overall, the discussion echoed many of the points raised at the first workshop back in July. Residents are encouraged to weigh in on the discussion via the online www.lafayettelists.com forum.

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[back](#)

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