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**HEADLINE:** HEMET: REVAMPING ENTERTAINMENT DISTRICT TOPS PRIORITY LIST;  
TRANSFORMATION;

**Officials' goal is to attract** more people and private investors

**BYLINE:** HERBERT ATIENZA; THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

**BODY:**

Downtown Hemet was the logical choice for Marjorie McNamara and Corinne Kasten when they needed a site for their new business.

It had a suitable building and a ready-made clientele in the nearby office workers.

What clinched the deal was the more than \$ 80,000 in state federal money they got through the city.

That financial assistance allowed them to fix the building, paving the way for the Scrumptious European Bakery & Caf that opened last summer.

"It made a huge difference," McNamara said.

Getting the two businesswomen to open their business in downtown Hemet is one of the success stories that Hemet officials point to as proof of improved efforts to revitalize downtown Hemet.

Over the past several years, the city has spent millions, mainly through federal and state redevelopment funds, to buy and construct properties and buildings, refurbish storefronts, put utility lines underground and seismically strengthen buildings - all in an ambitious attempt to turn downtown into "the hub of the valley."

Supporters say those efforts are bearing fruit, as downtown becomes more appealing and holds its own against the city's other commercial areas.

City officials want to push it to another level.

They want to develop a plan to transform Hemet's downtown into the center of the San Jacinto Valley, complete with common design themes, which would attract more private investments and get more people to go downtown.

The bakery owners support the idea and say it's a key reason their shop in the old Lion's Club building on Carmalita Street is open.

Without the money, McNamara said, they might not have raised enough to complete building improvements.

"Without their help, we won't be here today," Kasten said.

#### OLD TOWN HEMET?

Devonshire Avenue to the north, Kimball Avenue to the south, State Street to the west and Buena Vista Avenue to the east bind the downtown core.

"I think we've done a good job downtown, but we want to do more," Mayor Roger Meadows said.

"The people who moved in from Orange County and San Diego, they drive through downtown, but they probably don't see it as a place to stay the whole day," he said.

Meadows said he wants downtown to evolve the same way as Old Town Temecula, which has blossomed into a lively entertainment district after receiving a \$ 5.2 million streetscape redevelopment in the past few years.

"I would like to see old-style street lights and music piped in from hidden speakers. I want to see a friendly atmosphere in Old Town Hemet," Meadows said.

#### LESSONS LEARNED

Hemet isn't the only city seeking to revive its downtown and would benefit from heeding lessons learned by others, some experts say.

"Pasadena has had roaring success, while San Bernardino has tried and tried, but nothing seems to hold," said Andy McCue, managing director of the Center for Sustainable Suburban Development at UC Riverside.

It's important for cities to identify the niches that their downtowns are filling, McCue said.

Downtown Pasadena was successful in transforming itself into an entertainment destination, he said, while downtown San Bernardino has suffered from declining incomes and ambitious but largely unfocused redevelopment efforts.

Douglas Johnson, a senior research associate at The Rose Institute of State and Local Government at Claremont McKenna College, said it makes sense for Hemet to reinvigorate downtown in light of the growth in the valley.

He said it's important for the city to be realistic with its goals and to work to interest stakeholders such as developers, businesses and residents.

Assistant City Manager Mark Orme said the city wants to capitalize on the area's historic appeal.

"We'd love to see more restaurants come to downtown, like the Old Spaghetti Factory," he said.

#### A LONGSTANDING ISSUE

Councilwoman Lori VanArsdale, a long-time downtown redevelopment supporter, remembers a big community meeting about six years ago to discuss ways to revive downtown, which had suffered from blight and fleeing businesses because of the economic downturn in the early 1990s.

"They agreed that downtown needed work and needed a major reinvestment," she said, adding that a strong downtown strengthens Hemet's sense of community and its link with its past.

Since then, she said, the city located a new \$ 14.5 million city library within the downtown core and agreed to purchase a downtown building for City Hall. The city also started the first phase of hiding utilities underground.

Scores of downtown businesses took advantage of programs giving state and federal grants to those who want to upgrade and refurbish their buildings.

Future projects include refurbishing the historic Hemet Theatre, a second phase of burying utility lines and facade improvements on many more storefronts.

Connie Hall, spokeswoman for the Downtown Hemet Business

Association, said there is now less blight downtown, compared to a few years ago, when dilapidated buildings dominated the area.

Hall said the city has to keep up the efforts to prevent blight from returning by focusing on issues such as homelessness and public safety.

Some business owners say they are more hopeful for downtown's future.

"They've been very helpful and we appreciate it," said Ron Bryson, owner of Bryson Paintball on Florida Avenue, which received a fresh coat of paint and a new sign from the city about a year ago.

"Our building looks a lot nicer and it's a lot less dumpier here now," he said.

\* \* \*

#### REVITALIZING DOWNTOWN

The city of Hemet's efforts to revamp downtown include:

**ACQUISITIONS:** Buying downtown property for city offices or facilities.

**AID:** Offering state and federal grants for facade improvements to storefronts.

**COOPERATION:** Establishing closer ties between city officials and downtown businesses.

**THEME:** Planning to create a downtown theme, similar to the western look of Old Town Temecula.

\* \* \*

"HUB OF THE VALLEY": Hemet is reinvesting in its downtown to make it more vibrant and attractive. Many shops and businesses have taken part in a city facade improvement program, including those shown below.

1. Scrumptious European Bakery and Caf
2. Valley Music/Rustic Building
3. Hemet-San Jacinto Association of Realtors building

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE CITY OF HEMET

**GRAPHIC:** (1) DEEANN BRADLEY/THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE / Corinne Kasten, left, and Marjorie McNamara received more than \$ 80,000 in state federal money for repairs to their building. (2, 3) PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE CITY OF HEMET / [Before and after photos of the Scrumptious European Bakery & Caf] (4, 5) PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE CITY OF HEMET / [ Before and after photos of the Valley Music/Rustic building.] (6, 7) PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE CITY OF HEMET / [Before and after photos of the Hemet-San Jacinto Association of Realtors building.] (8) DEEANN BRADLEY/THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE / Lynn Throckmorton, president of the Assistance League of Hemecinto, leaves after having lunch at the Scrumptious European Bakery & Caf. The owners renovated their building with city help. (9) Marjorie McNamara is grateful for the financial assistance that led to the renovation of her business. "It made a huge difference," she says.; PHOTOS ; MAP

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