

**Sleepy Retail Community Wakens to Idea of Big Stores**

By MARGOT CARMICHAEL LESTER, Contributing Reporter



Even as national chains march into nearby locales, Montrose has managed to maintain a small-town feel – keeping its decades-old retail strip as an alternative to “urban village” areas like Old Town Pasadena and Santa Monica’s Third Street Promenade.

“You can do your dry-cleaning, get your hair cut, buy a birthday present, visit with your neighbors and meet your husband for dinner, all in three blocks,” quipped Linda Strack, treasurer of the Montrose Shopping Park Association and owner of Whites Gallery on Honolulu Avenue. “We have 150 businesses in the shopping park, and we’re all locally owned.”

But now there is talk of trying to lure larger retailers to the community, nestled just off the Foothill (210) Freeway between the Verdugo and San Gabriel mountains and straddling Glendale and unincorporated L.A. County.

“We’d like to attract some bigger businesses,” said Liz Church, executive director of the Montrose-Verdugo City Chamber of Commerce. “Not necessarily big names or huge chains, but complementary businesses that can fill an 18,000-square-foot space. There just aren’t many mom-and-pop shops that can take that kind of space.”

The Chamber of Commerce has joined with the Montrose Property Owners Association and two business improvement districts in establishing a growth plan.

“We want to maintain the small-town charm visually and in the retail mix,” Church said. “Other towns have gigantic business districts, but we want to remain cozy. Montrose will always be some place different – it’s like a time-warp.”

Settlers first came to the area in the early 1800s; its business community popped up in the 1920s around Honolulu Avenue (named by a Hawaiian expatriate). A decade later, developers planned a 300-acre subdivision and held a contest to name it. The couple submitting the winning entry, former Pennsylvanians, called the community Montrose after a town in their home state.

Its mostly retail-driven business community thrived until the late ’70s, when regional malls and national retailers began to draw people away. The trend continued with the influx of big-box stores in the 1980s, and many were ready to pronounce downtown Montrose dead.

In response, local merchants and the Montrose-Verdugo City Chamber of Commerce moved to form two business improvement districts – the Montrose Shopping Park Association and the Sparr Heights Merchants Association.

“The Chamber’s Oktoberfest and the Shopping Park’s Arts & Crafts Festival really create visibility,” said Church. Oktoberfest attracts 50,000 people each year, and the arts festival has become one of the top stops on the California craft show circuit.

In 1997, with \$900,000 from the city of Glendale, Montrose installed gaslights along Honolulu Avenue and refinished the streets and sidewalks. Landscaping was installed and electrical outlets were incorporated to accommodate special events.

Glendale provides the Montrose Shopping Park Association with \$15,000 a year and staff support to promote the area and plan events. “Glendale does what it can, but you can only cut the money so many ways. We’re at a point now where we need more if we’re going to grow,” said Jeff Williams, president of Montrose-based California Fast Food Services, which owns the Black Cow and the Star Café on Honolulu Avenue.

“It’s a delicate balance,” added Dave Ahern, Glendale’s economic development manager. “Montrose wants to be more successful, but not too successful. They’d like the success of Old Pasadena, but not that intensity. We’re working with them to figure out how to strike a balance.”

For example, increased retail traffic has put a squeeze on parking. “Montrose has always been a small bedroom community,” said Ahern. “Now it’s definitely a retail and restaurant destination venue.”

The city of Glendale, which provides police and fire services, has acquired the Paradise Ford property for \$1.7 million for conversion into a 134-space parking lot to open later this year.

“No large retailers are going to locate up here with the parking problem,” Williams noted. “They can’t get the permits they need to open up. And with stores in Pasadena and Glendale, they probably don’t want to dilute their business by moving up here anyway.”