

Town Center slowly growing into EDH's 'downtown'

By Mike Roberts
Staff writer

Business is picking up on Town Center Boulevard, and it's not just El Dorado Hills' people that find the south side of the freeway appealing for shopping, dining and lingering on the patios and promenade.

When Tony Mansour of the

Mansour Co. arrived in 1979, he had a dream "to have real a downtown." Shaped by his son Louie and developer Doug Wiele of Foothill Partners, that dream has evolved into what is now Town Center.

"People are getting used to coming here; they go wandering and exploring, and they want to come

back," said Louis Mansour.

In 1998, the Mansours sat down with Wiele to plan a downtown for EDH. Wiele recalls "People told us that nobody builds downtowns - that's not how they evolve. But actually, if you go back historically, you'll find that many downtowns did get laid out by somebody with an

idea of the place, and a vision."

That's what they set out to do.

They started by looking at why people came here - and what they left behind. By 1998, El Dorado Hills offered great housing, access to a good job market, and excellent schools. Families came for the quality of life, but "the one thing they couldn't bring with them was the place they had to leave to get here," said Wiele.

"Many of us came from places with a cool old downtown, like Lafayette, Danville, Pleasanton, Los Gatos, the peninsula cities," he said.

"There's something whimsical and emotional in our background about a downtown with a theater at the end of the street," said Wiele, who remembers the closing scene from "Back to the Future," with Michael J. Fox racing the DeLorean down a homey main street with a movie theater at the terminus.

And that's where they put it.

Turning onto Town Center Boulevard, Signature Theater is perched on the hill to the east. "It's an icon," said Wiele. "We're not sure where we remember it from, but that's where it belongs."

From a more pragmatic perspective, the theater drives traffic



Village Life Photo by Mike Roberts

VARIED ARCHITECTURE — Louie Mansour and Doug Wiele are responsible for a Town Center design strategy that encourages different types of buildings and avoids predictability. Each building evokes an architectural period, and in many cases, a former use.

See **TOWN CENTER**, page 20

TOWN CENTER *continued from front page*

to the main street businesses on nights and weekends, when shoppers are otherwise at home.

"We want people to feel comfortable; like they've been here before - but of course they haven't. It should evoke memories of places they like," said Wiele.

It seems to be working. "People are coming from all over the place to this town center," said Wiele.

"From the day it opened, this Mercedes dealership sold more Mercedes' in Sacramento than the Sacramento dealership," said Wiele. He is also proud that it has become the largest sales tax generator in El Dorado County.

There has been a lot written about what makes a good shopping street. Wiele read the books and could probably write one of his own. "For one thing, a good main street needs to be about four blocks long," he said. "Union square [in San Francisco] is roughly four by four blocks. The buildings go on beyond that, but the traffic drops off. Fourth Street, Berkeley, same thing. Look at the Montclair district in Oakland."

Parking is important. "There's a limit to how far people will walk from their car," he said. Town Center Boulevard is surrounded by parking, and "we have about three and a half blocks between Post Street and the theater. It fits," said Wiele.

But all the parking in the world won't draw shoppers without the right stores. "Consumers are curious. They'll come the first time," said

Wiele. "But if they don't find the experience and merchandise they are looking for, it's the last time."

Tony Mansour puts it this way. "Real estate is part of what we are doing in Town Center. What makes a great place, a great shopping street is not the buildings or the architecture. It's the merchants. The key to our business is good merchants."

"We want to see interesting, successful, owner-operated small businesses be the heart of the town center; we've wanted that from the get-go," said Wiele.

Town Center was built with private capital "that's tied to a vision between patience and cost," said Tony Mansour. "In a public company, they have to make money this year or the stock value goes down. Here, if we don't make money that first year, it's OK, because we're investing in a community."

"A normal shopping center gets built all at once and then you hope the right merchants come along - but they generally don't," said Wiele. "Compromises get made along the way. Here, we've had the luxury of being patient and building to the market - two buildings here, one there."

"We're not trying to fill the place up with chain stores. We have Juice it Up and PostNet, but what we really like about them is they're owner-operated small businesses," said Wiele.

From a financial perspective, it would be much easier for Wiele to

lease to chains. Banks love chain stores, "they know what they've got; it's predictable," he said.

"Too predictable," said Louis Mansour. "Those places are so sterile, they even smell the same."

"There's a consumer backlash against predictable merchandising," said Wiele. "Customers are saying that all the fun's gone out of shopping. So the whole drill for us is to create a street with character where the uses around it drive shopper traffic onto the street, so the owner operators get the traffic they need to survive."

In that regard, "The [El Dorado Hill Sports Club] is a gift from God," said Wiele. "We hoped to have some sort of spa and fitness facility, but we never thought we'd get a fitness club like this."

"The Mercedes dealership was another one of those things that just fell out of the sky," he said.

"Frankly, I think that stores like Philosophia, and Mama Ann's have become target destinations," said Wiele. "But the initial exposure might have happened on the way to the theater or drug store. There's an association 'Oh, I know where that's at'."

"That's what we're after with a Target store," said Wiele. Discussions are ongoing, but he is cautiously optimistic that a deal with Target is forthcoming. "They are consistent with our strategy," he said.

Customer demographics are changing across the country. "The

highest income households in America are shopping with the most frequency at Costco and Target," said Wiele. "They may spend more money at Nordstrom, but they are going to Target more often."

"Target has done a great job," said Wiele. "They attract a wide range of customers. We'd like those people on our main street."

Other department stores lack the focus that he sees at Target. "We went a long way in discussions with Federated Department Stores about a Macy's store," said Wiele. "But it's not clear that that Macy's is right for EDH. It's also not clear to me who their customer is any more."

Wiele is adamant that Target is not signed. "We're talking, and they're talking," he said. "What I am prepared to say is Target is exactly the type of store we want."

They're not the only ones.

In surveys of what EDH residents want in their community, things like farmer's markets, art galleries, and music venues are at the top of the list. "Target is right up there with those things," said Tony Mansour.

Wiele summed it up: "Bottom line, EDH is not Carmel. 'We can't design for the tourist. If we can't get enough people down here on a regular basis, everyone suffers.'"

Next week: A brief history of Town Center and the story behind the unusual architecture on Town Center Boulevard.