

New investments make a sound downtown

By SPENCER HOROWITZ

With the potential arrival of a Beverages & More and another Starbucks on Lincoln Avenue, Willow Glen is once again debating whether to embrace these commercial newcomers. As in the past, when Longs Drugs and Billiards & Brew (later becoming The Glen) sought their places on Lincoln, the community is divided on the merits of new businesses in Willow Glen's downtown.

One of the most attractive qualities of living in Willow Glen is the existence of a traditional, small-town main street where we can shop, eat and meet our friends and neighbors. Whenever houses come up for sale, the first line of the for-sale flier will inevitably boast "Walk to the Avenue." Residents and business owners both have a strong interest in supporting a thriving and dynamic Lincoln Avenue.

But our avenue is not as commercially healthy as it should be. Several storefronts are vacant, and many businesses struggle to attract customers. Not once in the past 16 years have all the stores on Lincoln Avenue been filled. Yet whenever a new business tries to invest in Lincoln Avenue, it seems some voices are raised in opposition. Some fear chain stores will hurt the mom-and-pops, and some simply hope

that an even better store will fill the empty space. These fears are misplaced, and unrealized hopes are no substitute for willing entrepreneurs.

Big-box chain stores are not poised to overwhelm Lincoln Avenue. The real threat from big-box retailers is their habit of building giant stores near Interstate off-ramps, surrounded by acres of parking. Those big boxes suck all of the customers and all of the life out of traditional downtowns. BevMo, like Longs, is pursuing the opposite of this big-box strategy.

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By abandoning their proven large-store-strip-mall business model, these successful retailers are taking a risk by downsizing their typical store to fit into a classic downtown such as Willow Glen. And by filling our empty storefronts, these retailers encourage Lincoln Avenue landlords to risk improving their properties, as we can see at the Garden Theater. This cycle of investment benefits all Willow Glen.

Fewer empty store fronts, improved buildings and more potential foot traffic are a plus for all Lincoln Avenue merchants, although some businesses fear potential competition. But Lincoln Avenue does not exist in a vacuum. The biggest threat for existing wine and liquor stores on Lincoln comes from the newly expanded wine and liquor section at our

local Safeway (which also added an in-store Starbucks, raising the competitive bar all around). And if BevMo and Starbucks do not come, other businesses will arrive to compete against other existing merchants.

The Willow Glen community simply cannot "manage" competition by cherry-picking retailers for Lincoln Avenue. Competition happens, no matter how much we try to restrain it.

When I arrived in Willow Glen in 1989, the downtown was exclusively mom-and-pop retailers. Most stores were closed in the evening and on weekends. The decor and product offerings at most of these retailers hadn't been updated since the Nixon-Kennedy debates. There was little traffic and plenty of parking because few customers had any reason to come downtown.

Today we have a more attractive main street because of the stimulating, competitive mix of locally owned, regional and national retailers. We can support those businesses we enjoy by spending our money, and we can support Lincoln Avenue as a whole by encouraging entrepreneurs and landlords to make the risky investment in our downtown.

Empty storefronts attract vandalism and graffiti, and drive customers away. Occupied storefronts encourage pedestrian shopping and landlord improvements, and are the very symbol of a thriving downtown. Let's make downtown Willow Glen successful by welcoming the businesspeople who want to take a chance on us—because it's always easier to open a shop at the mall.

Spencer Horowitz, a resident and business owner in Willow Glen, is chairman of the San Jose Small Business Development Commission. The views expressed are his own, and do not reflect the official views of the commission or the city of San Jose. ☛
