Housing issues are complex. I make this statement after returning from a county planning commission meeting in Martinez where I serve as a planning commissioner for Contra Costa County.

The agenda for our April 24th meeting had two primary items on it. One was a proposed 29-unit townhouse style development in Bay Point (formerly known as West Pittsburg) and the other item pertained to cannabis exclusion districts. Regarding the development proposal, county staff was recommending approval. Even though I had some concerns about the project I was also in favor of approving the project.

The project was being proposed by Habitat for Humanity and because several variances were required in order to make the plan work as proposed it made the situation much more complicated for the commissioners. A General Plan amendment as well as a rezoning were necessary for the project to move forward.

I’ll spare you the long version and get to the heart of the matter. Parking was the issue. A majority of the planning commissioners felt that there was inadequate parking designed into the plan. In order to build 29 units on the site

Known informally as the “Playland Apartments,” this five-story, 50 unit residential mixed-use building will soon occupy the southwest corner of Jefferson and San Pablo avenues in El Cerrito. Read more about this in the story below. A ground breaking ceremony will be held on Monday, May 6th, at 11 a.m., with lunch served at noon courtesy of Wang Brothers Investments LLC. Chamber members are invited to attend. Email: info@elcerritochamber.org to RSVP or phone 510-705-1202.

Kevin Wang Building a New El Cerrito

Kevin Wang has done well running import/export business Potteryland (potterylandusa.com) for 16 years, but he’s ready for something bigger. Wang is president and CEO of Alameda-based Wang Brothers Investments LLC, the developer of the next project about to break ground on San Pablo Avenue.

The five-story mixed-use project at the former Playland-not-at-the-Beach property at 10963 San Pablo will have commercial space and parking on the ground floor. Above will be 50 market-rate apartments ranging from studios to three bedrooms. Topping everything will be a rooftop garden for tenants and in front of the extensively landscaped building will be new street art.

Wang, 46, who has a master’s degree in business administration from St. Mary’s College in Moraga, is relatively new to the development game, but “very familiar” with El Cerrito, having lived here from 1993 to 2009.

He was looking for development opportunities when a broker pitched the Playland site. Coupled with the soaring demand for housing, Wang said it was an easy choice “because the city is promoting transit-oriented development” through its San Pablo Avenue Specific Plan. The plan promotes new proposals by relaxing the regulatory process and requirements to meet the regional housing need and take advantage of the city’s two BART stations.

“People are looking for housing,” Wang said. “There are a lot of new jobs coming to the San Francisco Bay Area, I believe a lot of tech or financial-related jobs.”

The plan allows the project to have fewer automobile parking spaces than would have been required in the past, freeing space for the building itself.
FOLLOW US on Twitter. It’s a way of marketing the Chamber via social media. @CerritoChamber tweets have been fast and frequent now that we’ve got a person to handle the task of posting events, member news, along with just about anything else. In fact, looking at my Twitter feed, I’d say we’re out-tweeting President Trump! Publicity is always good.

Need restaurant space? A corner location at 6401 Fairmount (at Kearney) is advertised at $7,000 per month for 800 sq. ft. Renovation has been underway since forever, or so it seems, and now it’s complete. Call the Chamber office for details.

Change of watch. Long time members Drs. Carol and Joe Ball have retired as of April 1st. Ball Chiropractic Center is now owned by Dr. Christopher Nizer who has worked with the Balls for years. The change is seamless for patients.

There is a special ribbon cutting event scheduled on Saturday, May 4th, and you are invited to attend. Open house from 1 until 3 o’clock, with the ribbon snip at 2 p.m. 10468 San Pablo is the address.

On June 8th, there will be another event at Ball Chiropractic to mark the passing of the baton. Details to be announced in the June Byline.

Licensed and legal. JunkCat, the fast growing El Cerrito hauler, was the first business to get the Contra Costa Environmental Health refuse hauler permit. Proper disposal is important. Keep that in mind before hiring some fly-by-night operator. Mention the El Cerrito Marketing Program mailer and get a discount. Go to junkcat.com.

As predicted a month ago, New Dumpling is now open at 10064 San Pablo (formerly Cigar Box Kitchen). A very soft opening was on April 20th. Hand made and fresh for your order, watch the process before you eat.

Del Norte changes. The Dollar Tree is gone to be replaced by dd’s Discounts, which is owned by Ross. Across the avenue from Del Norte BART at 11555 San Pablo, dd’s is right next to Ross. Construction underway now.

Grand opening. Hana Gardens, the senior apartments at 10860 San Pablo, will have its official opening on Monday, May 13th, from noon until 2 o’clock. The whole project looks sharp; a nice improvement to the block. Signs and pavers in front of the buildings tell the history of Japanese flower growers, once a major industry here.

The “411” on 510. On July 22nd, a new 341 area code will become effective for the 510 area. This is an overlay so nobody loses their existing 510 area code. However, you’ll need to dial “1” before the area code and phone number from landlines. Reprogram your auto-dialers for alarm systems and such. More phones mean more numbers.

Hampton Inn. The El Cerrito Design Review Board will discuss the 124-room hotel planned for Cutting and San Pablo on May 1st at 7:30 p.m. at City Hall. Very early in the game, but a major new business that will eventually build at that corner.

What is now the Ohlone Greenway was once the route of the Santa Fe Railway. Trains passed through El Cerrito every day. The final freight train made a special stop at Fairmount Avenue in May 1979.

Left to Right: Ray “Red” Johnson, Trainmaster; Bruce Schiedler, Conductor; Harry Kudsk, Brakeman; Gary MacLaren, El Cerrito city council member; El Cerrito resident Art Pipes, Engineer; Cecil Lilley, Trainmaster.
I had an unexpected and enlightening phone conversation today. I'd like to share with Byline readers. It was unexpected because I thought for sure my cold call would go direct to voice mail. Instead, much to my surprise, not only did my target answer, he proceeded to cordially engage in a conversation for about 10 minutes. It was enlightening because he is a property owner with an empty building along San Pablo Avenue, and he shared some thoughts with me about the reasons his building has remained empty for a year or so.

I will say upfront, the space is on the Richmond side of the avenue, so I wasn’t able to look up any details in our city’s database of projects. But, as I explained to him, this space feels like it’s in the heart of El Cerrito, and as manager of the chamber of commerce, I wanted and needed to know what his plans were for the site and why it was unoccupied for so long. El Cerritans are sick and tired of empty storefronts, as city staff and readers of Nextdoor.com can affirm.

He seemed willing to give an overview of his perspective and reasons, which I tried to listen to neutrally, without judgment. After all, I’m from the school that considered the word developer as a synonym for the devil. Fortunately, my views toward that profession have mellowed, partly due to my involvement in the local economy movement. Basically, the gist of his comments was that it wasn’t up to him or his fault. The applicants have nearly no business experience, he told me. Or they are struggling and can’t afford more than $300 in rent. The general slump in bricks and mortar retail also was blamed for not sending more viable potentials to his door. All this was to say he was at the mercy of lousy economic times and just waiting for the right applicant. Then he would welcome them, expedite the lease papers and seal the deal.

We continued to chat and I told him that a big developer had pleasantly surprised me by joining the Chamber as an official member in advance of starting some new housing projects in El Cerrito. To me, this was a small positive sign that property developers might be waking up to realize it would actually help their image and reputation if they did a lot more to foster good relationships with local groups in the communities in which they want to build. I reminded him of various resources the Chamber offers to everyone, including property owners. He offered a vague agreement to those ideas and the call was over with no further action expected.

As usual, there are several sides to any story. Just prior to this phone call, I had another call to hear another side of the story from a reliable source working for a county economic growth organization. Yes, indeed, there already is a serious applicant with a business plan, who has been trying to move forward on this space for months, but is encountering a seemingly non-responsive property owner. Maybe she’s one of the applicants deemed not prepared enough or financially ready; I don’t know. I wasn’t being asked to intervene, but to try to discover what was causing the owner to drag his feet on getting his space leased out.

I reported my summary of the phone call to the source as I shared with you above. She appreciated the news and promised to keep me in touch with further updates. Of course, I’m hoping that the main two parties start communicating honestly and without more delay. I’m hoping that if there is an actual dispute over terms, they will be willing and able to each find a way to a solution that works for both.

The point of this retelling is to remind us that most of the time, for any kind of progress and growth to happen, we probably have to step outside out of familiar routines and expectations to try something new. To foster equitable economic progress, all involved stakeholders need to be willing to go out of the comfort zone and look for compromises when needed.

We, in our various roles, as El Cerrito residents, property owners, business operators, entrepreneurs and everyday people, might be better served if we would remember to cultivate flexibility of our ideas, values, desires as well as acceptance of someone else’s ideas, values and desires.

The views expressed here are the author’s and do not necessarily represent those of the Chamber Board. Email: l.martinengo@elcerritochamber.org; cell: 1-510-778-5883.

Creating Local Economic Vitality Means Having to Compromise

Manager’s Musings
LISA MARTINENGO

MAY MIXER at McBears
10458 San Pablo, El Cerrito
Wed., May 8 • 5:30-7:30 p.m.

• Look for the happy face at the happy place
• Full bar staffed by expert mixologists
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• Don’t miss the game on big screen TVs

DON’T MISS THIS!
A Safe Place to Conquer Fear of Public Speaking

BY LISA MARTINENGO

Are you one of the many people who begin to perspire just at the thought of doing a presentation to your colleagues or clients? Would you rather visit the dentist than address a public audience? Don’t worry, it’s a common condition found everywhere in both social and professional circles, but one that doesn’t have to stifle you forever.

If you’d like to get beyond this state of fear every time you need to speak publicly, check out The Practice Space! It’s a new place in town ready to help you gain the skills and confidence to do just that. Their multi-pronged mission is (1) to provide a space to foster self-confidence and teach skills to communicate clearly and (2) to elevate often under-represented voices, be that youth or marginalized populations.

The Practice Space is the brainchild of AnnMarie Baines, a long time El Cerrito resident and El Cerrito High grad, whose early childhood of singing with the S.F. Girls Chorus helped instill self-confidence for public performance. However, even as an eight year old girl, AnnMarie remembers a teacher suggesting she join the El Cerrito High School speech and debate team. So it’s clear even a tender age, she had something to say and the determination to be heard!

AnnMarie spoke highly of former El Cerrito High faculty members, Sandy and Cathy Berman, who were founders and coaches of the speech and debate program and put El Cerrito High on the national map competing in what used to be called forensics. During her high school years, AnnMarie traveled across the U.S. with the team, building lasting relationships and skills that she continued to foster for her students when she started coaching the El Cerrito High speech and debate team in 2001.

Being around people who thrived on public speaking provided AnnMarie with a great sense of community, helping kick off her passion for helping people feel comfortable with public speaking and guiding her future career choices. She earned a Masters in Education Policy at Harvard, then a Ph.D. in Learning Sciences at University of Washington.

Amazingly, she still has close ties with former colleagues and former students from El Cerrito High. Some are working as volunteers or contractors at The Practice Space. AnnMarie got married, moved back to El Cerrito in 2011, and recently joined the public speaking faculty at U.C. Berkeley. Before founding The Practice Space, students on the El Cerrito High speech and debate team continued to come to her house for a place to practice, sparking the idea for the nonprofit.

Because she always gravitated toward coaching and nurturing good communication, AnnMarie began thinking of how to create a specific practice and leaning space for those wishing to improve their speaking skills and confidence level.

Ideas and planning began to gel in 2016, and the following year, AnnMarie was able to find a suitable building and publicly launch The Practice Space in July 2017 at the City of El Cerrito/worldOne Fourth of July Festival.

At The Practice Space, you’ll find a wide range of programs, activities and services that AnnMarie and team offer to adults, teens and children. For adults, the most common services are private sessions for practicing job interviews, conference presentations and speech writing. Prior to beginning lessons she offers a free phone consultation to clarify personal and professional goals. AnnMarie also arranges professional development workshops and retreats for business leaders wanting to offer benefit of communication training to their employees.

For children and teens, ages 8 to 18, there are summer day camps along with all sorts of other programs designed to help youth find and share their own voices. These camps teach students how to tell their story, present their opinions, listen effectively, and persuade an audience in a respectful and engaging manner. There’s even a student-run podcast available on iTunes, called “Youth Aloud,” where students share their experiences in life and school. Her summer camps have been attended by local students from El Cerrito and Richmond as well as students from Vallejo, Berkeley, Oakland, and Marin.

Beyond summer camps, AnnMarie partners with several schools even farther afield, traveling to Davis and Vallejo to hold onsite after school public speaking programs for students and workshops for parents to help them advocate for their children.

Every month, on the last Sunday, at 4-5:30 p.m., The Practice Space holds a Community Day, which is open to the public as well as all current students and partners. This is a casual event when youth and adults are working on in front of a supportive audience or listen to a guest speaker. The whole mission of The Practice Space is to build confidence and skills for communication in a safe and supportive environment.

Please check out their website to register for upcoming youth summer camps and come to the free, public family friendly “Spring to Action” event on Sunday, May 19th, from 6-9 p.m. at the East Bay Center for Performing Arts in Richmond.

The Practice Space
10261 San Pablo Ave., El Cerrito
510-708-0535
www.practice-space.org
KEVIN WANG BUILDS

Continued from page 1

Bicycle parking is emphasized instead, with one space per unit. There will be spaces for 37-40 autos, less than one space per unit. “Singles don’t want to bother with a car,” Wang said. “Cars are a major expense and we assume some people won’t want to own one.”

Even for those not inclined to ride, the site is five blocks from the Del Norte BART station, about a 12-minute walk, he said.

To minimize the footprint needed for parking, cars will be stacked using a mechanical system now gaining popularity and in use in new buildings in Oakland. Tenants will be able to retrieve their cars in under one minute, he said, and the system has a generator in the event of a power outage.

Overall, the project will be “very green, very efficient” with extensive insulation, Wang said, adding that he hopes to install solar panels in the future.

He said the ground floor commercial space, which will be 14 feet tall with large shiny windows, “will be a facelift for San Pablo Avenue.

“I’m going to try to bring a good restaurant to that location. A very exciting restaurant,” he said, adding that he is “very interested” to hear suggestions from Chamber members.

While the city process eased requirements in some aspects of the project, it still imposed some in others, such as the landscaping and street art, which will be a sculpture costing $150,000 to $200,000, Wang said.

The timetable calls for the project to be open for business in 15 months.

Wang has other projects in the pipeline, including two in Seattle and one a block away from the Playland project. The second El Cerrito project is still about two years away, he said, and will be similar in scope but on a larger lot. The first project is on a 15,000-square-foot site, the second has 20,000 square feet.

The proposals in Seattle will probably take longer than because they are both much larger — 200 and 280 units — and located downtown.

Wang said he is appreciative of the El Cerrito City Council, the Planning Commission and the Design Review Board. “They were very supportive,” he said.
Rental Property Hearings May 7

By John C. Stashik

The El Cerrito City Council will hold a public hearing on Tuesday, May 7th, at 7 p.m. to consider proposed ordinances setting up a rental property registry. The hearing will be in the council chambers at City Hall.

In addition, the council will also hold a public hearing to consider a just cause for eviction ordinance at the same time as the rental registry meeting.

The just cause ordinance would permit property owners to terminate tenancy only for certain reasons including:

1. Failure to pay rent.
2. Breach of a rental agreement.
3. Tenant illegal activities.
4. Violations of applicable health and safety code.
5. Substantial renovations.
6. Condominium conversion.
7. Removal of rental unit from market.
8. Owner move-in.

Property owners would be subject to other requirements including:

1. Anti-harassment protections for tenants.
2. Notice of tenants’ rights.
3. Notice of termination of tenancy.

Fees charged to property owners for the purpose of reimbursing the city for the cost of implementing these new ordinances will also be discussed.

The purpose of the public hearings is to allow the city council to formally consider amendments to the Municipal Code. A written report on the issue will be on file with the Community Development Department along with a posting on the city’s website.

As a public hearing, comments are welcome and interested persons should plan on attending the council meeting and sign up to speak.

For additional information, contact manager Lisa Martinengo at the Chamber office.

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FROM THE PRESIDENT
Continued from page 1

parking was reduced from the number of spaces that is ordinarily required. Staff supported this reduction in parking spaces because the site is close to transit lines including BART. Furthermore, staff explained that in the future the General Plan will be adjusted to recognize transit oriented housing with less dependency on personal vehicles and the need for as much parking.

I generally support development unless there are strong and compelling reasons not to. When variances of a major nature are involved that often becomes a deal breaker for me, especially if there is community opposition to the proposal.

This project had the support of county staff as well as the Bay Point Municipal Advisory Council which is comprised of residents. The trade off was less parking and more available affordable housing units or fewer units and more parking. There are always legitimate concerns about granting variances that deviate from established protocols. Those concerns combined with the potential impact of overflow street parking resulted in three of the five commission members present voting no on the project.

Even though I had valid concerns about the parking situation I still voted in favor of the project. The reality is that times are changing. As much as I enjoy the personal space of my automobiles, I firmly believe that in the future there will be less dependency on individually owned personal modes of transportation and greater dependency on public and quasi-public modes of transportation.

Transit oriented housing will be a major force in the future and it’s great to see El Cerrito at the forefront of this movement. There are a tremendous number of considerations that must be evaluated when projects are proposed. The length of time that it takes, and the fees involved in getting a project approved can be daunting. However, the process must be respected while at the same time concerted effort must be made to avoid adding any unnecessary impediments and/or discouraging regulations.

As I stated, times are changing and so have parking spaces too. It’s really tough these days trying to park a vintage full-size car in these compact parking spaces. It’s a new day, take it from a guy who knows!

TALK TO US
Comments? Suggestions? Submissions?
Contact the Byline
byline@elcerritochamber.org

Sales Tax Information

THE CALIFORNIA Department of Tax and Fee Administration (CDTFA) offers free seminars on how to file sales and use taxes.

Basic Sales & Use Tax will be offered in San Francisco on Thursday, May 9th, from 10 a.m. until noon.

New Business Orientation is a short seminar offered in San Francisco on Tuesday, May 7th, from 10 a.m. until noon.

These San Francisco classes are held at the CDTFA office, 121 Spear Street, Suite 460.

Other seminars are available for business owners. Check the CDTFA website www.cdtfa.ca.gov/seminar to register.

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CHAMBER LUNCHEON

Tuesday, May 21 • Noon to 1:30 p.m.

Guest Speaker: Melanie Mintz
City of El Cerrito Community Development Director

Changes Coming to San Pablo Avenue
• Learn about the San Pablo Avenue Specific Plan, complete streets plan and the Specific Plan update.
• Get your questions answered about plans for new residential and commercial development and other changes along the avenue.
• Discuss ways to support existing and stimulate new businesses on San Pablo Avenue.

El Cerrito Royale 3rd floor meeting room
6510 Gladys Ave., El Cerrito
RSVP to info@elcerritochamber.org
$20 ($22 credit card or PayPal)
Online reservation: www.elcerritochamber.org

Lunch by Los Moles Beer Garden

The Calendar

May
1 Chamber Board meets, 9 a.m. City Hall.
4 Ribbon Snip at Ball Chiropractic Center, 2 p.m. 10468 San Pablo Avenue.
5 Final performance of “All the Way.” 2 p.m. Contra Costa Civic Theatre. cccc.org
7 City Council meets, 7 p.m., City Hall.
8 Mixer at McBears Social Club, 5:30 p.m. See page 3.
9 Cerrito Classics. “Big” at the Rialto Cinemas Cerrito, 7 p.m.
21 Chamber meeting. See lunch box above.
21 City Council meets, 7 p.m., City Hall.

July
4 The annual City of El Cerrito/worldOne Independence Day festival. Sponsorship opportunities open now.

A complete directory of Chamber members can be printed from the website: www.elcerritochamber.org

Plaque Presented to NaNa

Ahmed Alqublani, proprietor of Nana Desserts, accepts a Chamber plaque from manager Lisa Martinengo. The store is located at Peppermint Tree Plaza, 10172 San Pablo Avenue, El Cerrito.

Byline

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Proud members of the El Cerrito Chamber of Commerce

May 2019