Here we go again. We started the new year with a very well attended luncheon last month where we installed our new directors to the board. Our guest speaker was Fiona Ma, candidate for State Treasurer in the upcoming election. Fiona told us about her background in public service and about some of her experiences and observations as an outgoing member of the Board of Equalization. She pulled no punches in describing some of the problems and past indiscretions that have occurred at the BOE due to its current structure and suggested that it is an institution that is in need of some major realignment and that could or should even be done away with all together.

She went on to discuss some of the issues surrounding the legalization of recreational marijuana in California. One of her main agenda items as State Treasurer would be to deal with the collection of marijuana sales tax due to the fact that it is still a Schedule 1 drug from a federal perspective. This means that banks are not allowed to handle the proceeds from marijuana production, sales or distribution. It’s a major dilemma that could eventually require the use of cryptocurrencies like bitcoin to get around federal banking laws. It was a very interesting discussion including great questions from attendees. Thanks to Café N’ne, one of our newest members, for providing the lunch. Stay tuned for more great speakers in the coming year.

In case you’re ever interested in attending, we have changed the schedule for our monthly board meetings, but the location of our meetings is up in the air right now. Our board will now meet on the first Wednesday of the month at 9 a.m. Unfortunately, we have run out of time at our current location. We received word that we need to vacate or office by February 28th. We are scram-
It’s tax time. How will the new federal tax law affect you? I’m no doubt the last person you’d want to ask about economics. But clearly, there are some significant changes. First, the top corporate tax rate will reduce from 35% to 21%. The standard deduction is raised to 20% for pass-through businesses. Plus the cost of depreciable assets can be written off in one year. What do you think? Drop me a note if so inclined; tell me: good, bad, or not interested.

Sales tax hassle. A letter received from the California Department of Tax and Fee Administration (formerly the Board of Equalization) informs me that members of the Statewide Compliance and Outreach Program (SCOP) will be visiting business owners within ZIP code 94530. SCOP-ers will check your seller’s permit, look at permits and licenses, and ask about your business operations among other things. Honest business operators who have a seller’s permit, accurately remit sales tax payments on time, and have never had an issue with CDTFA, appear to be low hanging fruit for SCOP. Obviously, it’s easier to pick on legitimate business owners than look for the cash only, under-the-table businesses that remit zero dollars in sales taxes. A slap in the face in my opinion.

I asked our January speaker, Fiona Ma, CPA, representing the second district of CDTFA about this. She basically blew the question off. Instead, she discussed marijuana stores and the need to collect taxes from those cash only operations. Granted, marijuana sellers soon will set up shop in El Cerrito (the new city cash cow), but there are no such Chamber businesses at this time. CDTFA must get their money from pot sales; that’s fine. But why hassle the long time legitimate businesses with SCOP squads when those businesses have always played by the rules? Fiona Ma can be reached at fiona.ma@boe.ca.gov should you desire to contact her.

Crab time. The El Cerrito Police Employees Association crab feed is on Saturday, February 17th, 6 p.m., at the Community Center. Usually a sell out, so get your tickets now at the police station, $45. Pasta, salad, garlic bread. Lots of raffle prizes too.

But wait, there’s more. Eagles Aerie 2323 will hold a crab feed on Saturday, February 24th, in their historic building (the one time Wagon Wheel) at 3223 Carlson Blvd. $45 for crab, pasta, salad, and tickets are on sale now.

Art on Fairmount. An old tree stump was crafted into a nice sculpture at John Wasnick’s Fairmount Auto Service on the corner of Liberty and Fairmount. Take a look.
The new year brings the prospect of legal pot selling shops closer to reality in El Cerrito. I never imagined it would become legalized in my lifetime, did you? In high school science class, the anti-pot film “Reefer Madness” was shown in the futile hopes of dissuading us from trying this new “evil” that was already being furiously smoked on the edge of campus. The culture around smoking grass was underground for so long, it’s incredible to see how things have changed now that people have realized all the money to be made.

Green Market Report, an online financially focused newsletter on cannabis, predicts statewide revenue will be from $9 to $11 billion this year and will rise as wrinkles are worked out. With the recent ordinance opening the door for two dispensaries in El Cerrito, it seems that city leadership hopes for a piece of the big revenue pie, too. Time will tell if city coffers will see substantial tax revenue or at least funds from the community benefit requirement of the dispensary’s license to operate.

Will the staff coming to work in the potentially lucrative El Cerrito dispensaries receive higher than average paychecks? I’m guessing not for the majority of employees. Instead, they will probably be looking at minimum wage which increased on January 1st, to $13.60 per hour, three dollars more than state law. I don’t know whether dispensaries fall into this category, but for businesses without expensive overhead this wage raise may not cause big distress. However, for many of El Cerrito’s small shops, restaurants and cafes, this required wage hike is having a big impact and consequences that needs to be better understood by the public. Lately, there have been some posts on a popular online platform that gripe about a price hike of their favorite restaurant.

Readers, it’s time we woke up and smelled the coffee, albeit high priced coffee. Asking merchants to pay a “living” wage means we need to accept the consequences of higher prices on products and goods we consume.

Recently, I heard separately from the owners of two very popular restaurant establishments in El Cerrito. The gist of both messages concerned the challenges they are dealing with partly as a result of the El Cerrito wage ordinance and other economic factors. Real frustration was evident, as the owners are feeling squeezed by increasing costs of keeping the doors open. The increase in wages, higher costs of food and supplies, high property rents, expanded sick leave, maternity leave, staffing issues, all make for untenably high operating costs.

Many people don’t realize that when an employee making minimum wage gets the required raise, other staff (making more than minimum) also expect an increase in pay so payroll costs for the merchant explode. Also, when paychecks are higher, other employee related costs such as benefits and insurance are impacted, too. All this leads to tough choices for our restaurant or shop owners; raising prices to consumers, cutting costs somewhere, scaling down, a combination of actions, or selling out altogether.

In the case of one of the city’s restaurants that put El Cerrito on the culinary map, they are now looking at their options, but will probably change their format to reduce the number of servers. It would no longer have full waiter service but be “fast casual,” meaning patrons order at a counter and the meal will be brought to the table.

To sum up, as customers and supporters of our city’s businesses, let’s keep in mind how much economic pressure a small business owner has to contend with and the consequences and aim to keep up the patronage just the same!

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

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Continued from page 1

bling to find a new headquarters and will announce right away as soon as one is found. If any of you have any resources, thoughts or suggestions for a new space, please let us know.

One of my objectives this year will be to try to develop a stronger relationship between our Chamber and both the El Cerrito Rotary Club and the city’s Economic Development Committee. We share some common resources with these two organizations in terms of business leadership and well as individuals keenly interested in enhancing, promoting, and bringing in new businesses to our community. So I am happy to announce that a joint mixer with the El Cerrito Rotary Club has been scheduled for Friday, March 23rd from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. at the Berkeley Country Club. It will be very well attended and I encourage you to come.

Lastly, the El Cerrito Police Employees Association will be holding its annual crab feed on Saturday, February 17th at the El Cerrito Community Center. There will be all you can eat crab, as well as salad, pasta, and bread plus great raffle prizes. All proceeds will benefit the police departments K-9 program. Tickets are $45 for adults and $25 for children up to 12 years of age.

Crab prices have been nuts this year. I recently paid $14 per pound and have yet to see it anywhere for less than $10 per pound. I also heard that due to a shortage this year, wholesalers are currently avoiding sales to local retailers and for the most part focusing their sales on organizations specifically for crab feeds. So this could be one of your last chances to enjoy a crab dinner this year. Email ecpeacrabfeed@yahoo.com for tickets.

Marty Kaliski, owner of Marty’s Motors, was recognized at the January meeting for his long service as a director and Chamber officer.

February 2018

BYLINE

Page 3
For starters, here’s a fun fact: Marvin Gardens Real Estate admits to getting its name from the beloved game of Monopoly! In real life, of course, the business of buying or selling a home is hardly a game but the professionals at Marvin Gardens have been at it long enough to make the process as easy as possible. Recently, I had the chance to sit down with Marion Henon, co-owner and designated broker for the firm. The company has been a Chamber member for decades. Currently, there are four office locations: El Cerrito, Kensington and two in north Berkeley.

Marion grew up locally, attended Berkeley High School and graduated from UC Berkeley with an independent studies degree. The freedom to dabble in a variety of courses was appealing and with a dean’s guidance, Marion carved out her own unique path of studies. At first, she thought about joining the business world, interviewing with Hewlett-Packard and Xerox, but soon realized she would be happier being her own boss. She was bitten by the entrepreneur bug. It was in the mid-eighties when Marion got her license to sell real estate and was hired at the Mason-McDuffie office that once occupied the big house on San Pablo Avenue near Lincoln. Here Marion met her soon-to-be husband, Todd Hodson (also co-owner), and the core group of 15 to 20 people that eventually left Mason-McDuffie together, to form their own business. As Marion explained, the old company culture prioritized sales figures above all else. She and the others envisioned a more customer focused real estate service, establishing a good rapport with clients, offering lots of extra help while navigating the buying or selling process. Thus, Marvin Gardens El Cerrito was formed, partnering with the original Marvin Gardens on Solano Avenue. They rapidly expanded to Kensington and to Hopkins Street, Berkeley.

Between the four offices, there are 70 Realtors, providing an enormous wealth of knowledge and experience to share with clients and colleagues. Marion, as designated broker, has the responsibility of overseeing the transaction files of all the agents. There are four additional people assisting her with this formidable yet essential task, two are coordinating, keeping aware of deadlines for documentation and two review and check over every file. Each sale transaction could generate hundreds of pages, all of which have to be checked for accuracy and compliance with state law.

Impressively, Marvin Gardens doesn’t use hundreds of pages for every home sale! They went digital five years ago, and now every document and disclosure page is scanned into part of an electronic file. Of course, they will provide a printout for those clients asking for paper. Over the years, the process of buying and/or selling a home has become increasingly complex. In the 30 some years she’s been in the business, Marion has seen the basic purchase contract blow up from two to 12 pages and that’s just one document among many.

Fortunately, for clients, Marion and Todd place a high priority on continuing education for their agents, having weekly meetings, very often with guest speakers on a myriad of important topics. There could be a CPA one week, an earthquake retrofit expert the next and a sales trainer the next. They work hard to be sure their agents are up to date on all matters pertaining to houses, inside and out! Marvin Gardens’ agents are specialists for the East Bay, covering an area from about Hercules to San Leandro. They were the first certified green real estate office in the area and many agents are deeply involved in community activities. In El Cerrito, the staff has done tree planting for Earth Day and they’ve sponsored the musicians at the Kensington Farmers Market for years. There’s even a great office rock band that plays for nearby charity events. Not many real estate offices can claim that.

In sum, it was quite heartening to hear the story of this successful locally owned business whose business philosophy and actions are about helping people with their housing needs while making the nearby neighborhoods a better place to live.
IN RECOGNITION OF BLACK HISTORY MONTH

El Cerrito Royale
Presents a FREE Concert
and
All-You-Can-Eat Soul Food Buffet

Consonance Gospel Quartet
Featuring Soloist Paul Foster Jr.

Sunday, February 18th
11:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

Theme:
“African-American in Times of War”

Main Dining Room
RSVP: 510-234-5200

El Cerrito Royale
6510 Gladys Ave., El Cerrito

Need it Gone? Call the Cat!

JUNKCAT is a new junk removal service operating in El Cerrito and the surrounding area. We remove all kinds of non-hazardous solid waste including:
- Furniture/mattress/household goods
- Apartment/eviction cleanout
- Retail store cleanout
- Construction debris
- Yard debris and more

JUNKCAT arrives promptly, removes unwanted junk carefully and disposes of it properly. We carry general liability insurance for your protection. JUNKCAT diverts a significant amount of reusable items from the landfill and recycles metal, hard plastic and paper material whenever practicable.

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On January 30th, the dock-less bike sharing company LimeBike launched in El Cerrito. LimeBike, which is already operating in nearby Albany, Alameda, and South San Francisco, will bring 100 bicycles to El Cerrito’s streets for a six-month pilot program.

The bicycles will provide El Cerrito residents, businesses, and visitors with an affordable, reliable, and sustainable option for traveling throughout El Cerrito and Albany.

The El Cerrito City Council has guided staff to pursue alternative transportation modes to increase bike ridership, as supported by the city’s Climate Action Plan, Active Transportation Plan, and the 2015-2020 Strategic Plan. A primary goal of the city is to reduce vehicle miles traveled by creating a well connected, pedestrian-friendly, bicycle and transit-oriented urban environment that will make it easier for residents and visitors to leave their car behind. LimeBike’s dock-less bike share program is consistent with this goal and vision.

In addition, LimeBike is able to offer this service to residents at no cost to the city. This differs from traditional dock-based bike sharing programs which require significant investments in docking infrastructure.

LimeBike rides cost just one dollar for 30 minutes, or 50 cents for students. Low-income residents will be able to ride up to 100 rides per month, for just five dollars.

To ride a LimeBike, simply download the iPhone or Android smartphone app to find a bike nearby, unlock the bike by scanning or entering the bike’s plate number, and then go for a ride. When you’re finished, lock the bike’s back wheel to complete your trip. Remember to park responsibly, leaving the LimeBike near a bike rack or on the side of the sidewalk as to not block pedestrian traffic.

To celebrate the launch, new riders can use the code “LimeCerrito” to receive their first five LimeBike rides for free. Go to www.limebike.com/en-us/ to download the app and get started.

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**MIXER**

Friday, March 23
5:30-7:30 p.m.

Berkeley Country Club

*Enjoy hors d’oeuvres*

*No host bar*

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**El Cerrito Chamber of Commerce**

Linking Business and Community Since 1936
An unsolicited comment from an El Cerrito Marketing Program advertiser

“It has been by far the most successful campaign I’ve seen done by the Chamber. The return on investment on it is phenomenal… I, for one, will be signing up each time as the impact that it has had on [my business] has been nothing short of a complete success.”
Meet the Mayor

Gabe Quinto
CHAMBER LUNCHEON
Tuesday, February 20
Noon to 1:30 p.m.
El Cerrito Royale
3rd Floor meeting room
6510 Gladys Ave., El Cerrito
RSVP to info@elcerritochamber.org
$20 ($22 credit cards or PayPal)
Online reservation:
www.elcerritochamber.org

Lunch prepared by
La Strada
ITALIAN CUISINE

Calendar of Events

Feb. 6 City Council meets, 7 p.m., City Hall.
7 Board of Directors meets, 9 a.m., Chamber office.
8 Cerrito Classics: “Moonstruck” at 7 p.m.
Rialto Cinemas Cerrito.
16 Premiere: “The Secret in the Wings” at 8 p.m.
Contra Costa Civic Theatre. Through March 11.
cct.org
16 Deadline for your El Cerrito Marketing Program
advertising cards.
20 Chamber of Commerce luncheon. See box above.
20 City Council meets, 7 p.m., City Hall.
22 Grand opening celebration at the Dentists of El Cerrito
Plaza. See page 1.
Mar. 23 El Cerrito Rotary Club and Chamber of Commerce
mixer at Berkeley Country Club. 5:30 p.m. The BCC is
sponsoring the hors d’oeuvres and it is a no-host bar.

Local Honey Now
at the Farmers Market
From Richmond

Farmers Market
AT EL CERRITO PLAZA
Open Tuesday & Saturday 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.
SPONSORED BY

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

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February 2018