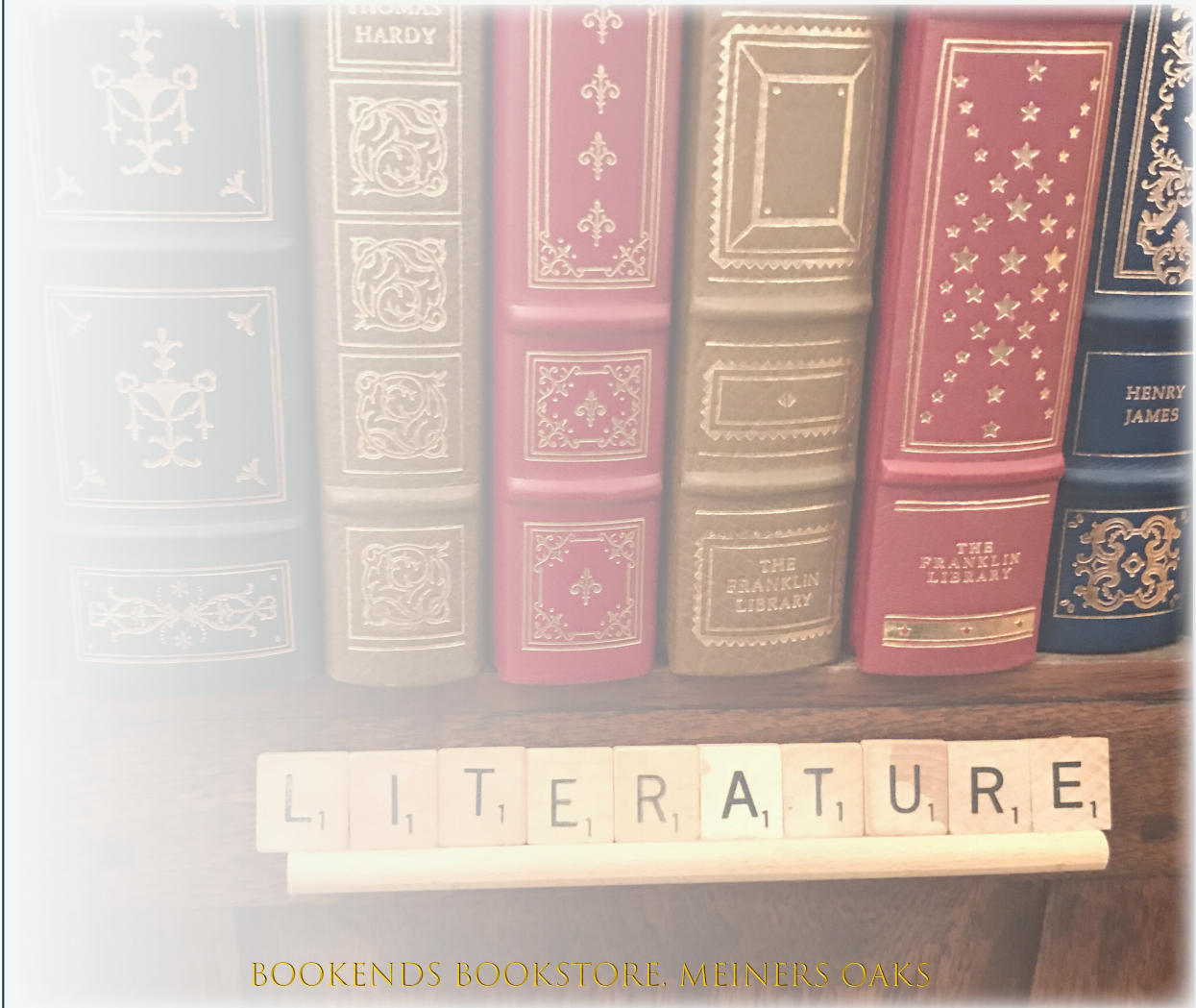


Identity Dossier

presented to

Ojai & Meiners Oaks, California



BOOKENDS BOOKSTORE, MEINERS OAKS



CIVILIS CONSULTANTS

PO Box 28502
Portland, OR 97228
503.867.8465

civilisconsultants.com



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Project Overview	1
Identity Findings	2
<i>Characterization</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Objective</i>	<i>26</i>
<i>Relationship</i>	<i>36</i>
<i>Environment</i>	<i>42</i>
<i>Meiners Oaks Spotlight</i>	<i>46</i>
<i>Downtown Ojai Spotlight</i>	<i>50</i>
Property Owner Toolkit	54
Business Owner Toolkit	61
Public Sector/Agency Toolkit	69
Conclusion	83

PROJECT OVERVIEW

In early 2019, the Economic Development Collaborative (EDC), in conjunction with the Ojai Valley Chamber of Commerce, and the Agora Foundation, embarked on a scope of work with Civilis Consultants to assist the EDC as they build a program to foster business resiliency in communities that may be subject to natural disasters. To inform the EDC's efforts, Civilis Consultants has created this Identity Framework for two pilot communities: Meiners Oaks and downtown Ojai. This framework is intended to provide goal identification and brand scaffolding that can inform EDC's efforts to complete: a) improved connections to free services offered by Small Business Development Centers in Ventura County; b) training for hospitality and tourism businesses; and, c) assistance to brick & mortar businesses, including an e-commerce presence.



This Is Why Everyone Loves the Valley!



Meiners Oaks

The culmination of the project is this Civic Dossier, which lays out findings and toolkits for the top three stakeholders in commercial districts: property owners, business owners, and the public sector/agencies. Because this work is meant to provide an overview for communities to use in the future, it is heavy on findings. And, because it is meant to assist agencies with policies and assistance programs, there will be a particular focus on recommendations for this group.

Assessments of the two commercial areas in 2019 included:

- **Tours.** Guided tours of both Meiners Oaks and downtown Ojai.
- **Story Framework Workshops.** Included training on how the framework impacts economics, followed by an exercise to apply the framework.
- **Interviews.** Conducted interviews with the EDC, Ojai Valley Chamber of Commerce, and a mix of business owners in the communities.
- **Survey.** Both Meiners Oaks and Ojai completed story framework surveys.
- **District Secret Shopper.** Civilis toured the districts and select businesses with a “tourist hat” on — recording what enticed and the places that provided positive brand association, as well as areas for improvement.

IDENTITY FINDINGS

Places are telling stories, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, whether they mean to or not. If a commercial district is not intentionally considering and actively telling its own story, one is emerging anyway, and it's often not a good one. In all aspects of marketing, economic development, and public policy, story should inform how cities and towns answer these sorts of questions:

- Why would a company want to locate to your town?
- Who might visit your commercial district?
- How do you become a local hangout?
- Would a lender be willing to risk investment in a project located in your downtown?
- Does your city provide opportunity for a wide cross section of residents?



Citrus Is a Part of the Valley's Identity

To build a sustainable, resilient commercial district, stakeholders should have a shared understanding of its identity—which means they should understand **all** of the elements of the story that are communicated through buildings, roads, signs, traffic, businesses, events, priorities, relationships, and a place's context.

One of the most effective ways to quantify the wide array of identity attributes is to use the CORE Story Framework—the same building blocks that improvisation artists and screenwriters use to create compelling stories.

This framework is a helpful way to understand both the tangible and intangible elements of a district's brand, so it can be leveraged in new and interesting ways.

CORE STORY FRAMEWORK

The Story Framework is made up of four components: Characterization, Objective, Relationship, and Environment. These are the essential ingredients to developing a complete story, whether you are doing an improv show or branding a commercial district.

STORY FRAMEWORK

Characterization

Objective

Relationship

Environment

This section will break down the four elements of the story framework for both Meiners Oaks and Ojai.

Characterization

In fiction, characterization refers to the part of a story that is told through the physical presence of a character, such as voice, attitude, energy, race, haircut, clothing, walk, etc. In animation, there is a saying that if you nail the walk, you nail the character, because a character's walk communicates so much about them. When we first encounter a character in life, or through a story, we go through our address book of stereotypes and pull out the stereotype that most closely matches this new character. If the character matches our stereotype, we are satisfied and then no longer need to engage. But, if there is some aspect of the character that is unexpected, that is where we engage, that's where story happens, the tension between the expected and the reality that is in front of us.

For a city, characterization is everything that your city presents to the world physically, such as streets, buildings, signage, lighting, homes, yards, parks, and natural environment. Physical communications also contribute to this element of story through brochures, websites, billboards, print ads, and TV advertising. All of these things play a role in how a district represents itself. Characterization can tell us whether a city is dense, rural, blue-collar, wealthy, suburban, elite, safe, economically successful, or financially stressed.

Because the physical portion of a place's story is broadcasting itself 365 days a year and cannot really be "turned off", it's the most important part of story for a place. Given its importance, it's fitting that the CORE framework starts with characterization.

CHARACTERIZATION: EVERYTHING PHYSICAL TELLS A STORY

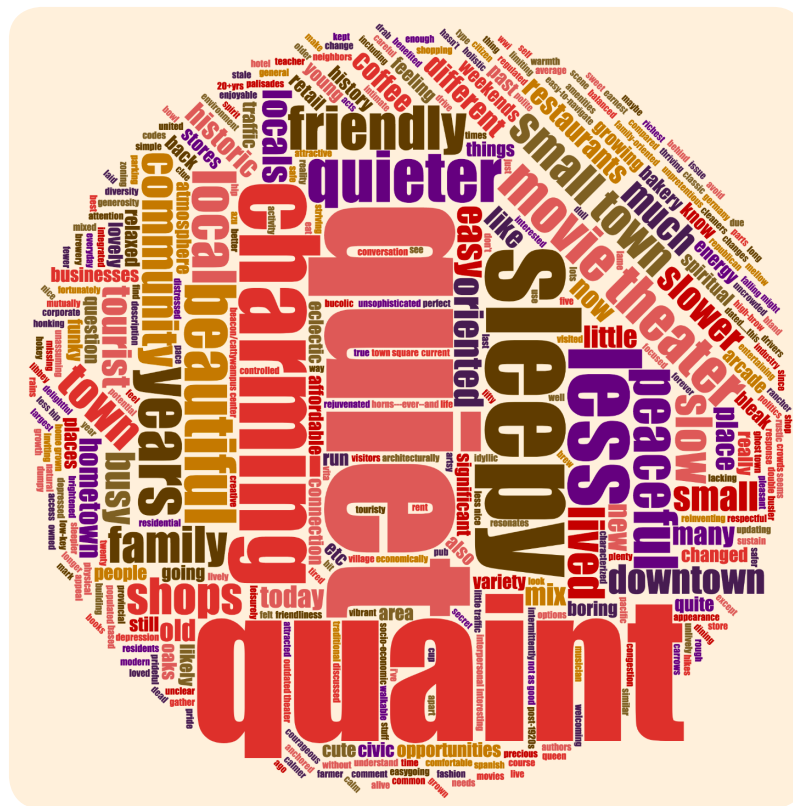


In surveys, and during in-person workshops, we asked stakeholders to describe the physical story of Meiners Oaks (MO) and Ojai in the past, in the present, and also what they might want it to be in the future! The following word clouds show their answers.

WHAT WORDS WOULD YOU USE TO DESCRIBE **MO** IN THE PAST?



WHAT WORDS WOULD YOU USE TO DESCRIBE **OJAI** IN THE PAST?



Very different physical stories are presented by the word clouds on the previous page about Meiners Oaks and downtown Ojai. (Please note, in word clouds, the bigger the word, the more frequently it was said; the smaller the word, the less often.)

For Meiners Oaks, the **hardware** store was an important physical presence. The town was considered to be **run-down** and **scary** in the past, which obviously impacts economics. It's relationship to **Ojai** was referenced, for better or worse. (You will notice that in almost all answers about MO, Ojai is a frequently mentioned, but the reverse is not true.)

On the positive side, it was uniquely **funky** (this word often has positive and negative connotations for communities — they like the individuality expressed, but may feel execution could be better).



Leading Business: Hardware in Meiners Oaks

Ojai has three big words that immediately evoke a physical story: **quaint**, **charming**, and **beautiful**. Typically, words like **quaint** and **charming** are speaking to buildings and scale. This implies slower streets, less traffic, people walking, smaller buildings built right up to the sidewalk, right next to each other. The word **beautiful** generally speaks to the setting and the natural environment of a place. These are all positive physical stories.



Folks Can't Wait for the Theater to Reopen

The other big theme in the Ojai word cloud is that there are a lot of references to the downtown physically having fewer people in the past, represented by words such as **quiet**, **peaceful**, **sleepy**, **slow**, **slower**, **quieter**, **local**.

Also, it's worth noting that people really do miss the **movie theater**, which is a physical place that brings locals together.

The next question in terms of the evolution of the physical story for both of these commercial districts was to look at how survey takers and workshop attendees described both the MO Main St and downtown Ojai today. The results are shown in the word clouds on the following page.

WHAT WORDS WOULD YOU USE TO DESCRIBE **MO** TODAY?



WHAT WORDS WOULD YOU USE TO DESCRIBE **OJAI** TODAY?



Meiners Oaks sees a big uptick in improvement between the past and present word clouds. **Eclectic** and **funky** show that the physical story is perhaps not uniform, but that it's interesting and authentic, and certainly distinct, if not always executing at the same level. These are all great attributes for creating district identity.

New words are sneaking into word clouds as compared to the past that indicate positive economic change: **growing**, **cool**, **energized**, **artsy**, **relaxed**, and **quaint**. This is a fantastic arc and definitely indicates positive change in how Meiners Oaks is presenting itself to the world.

Bohemian, **hip** and **hipster** making it into the word cloud also tell us something about who might be attracted to Meiners Oaks: young people.

Ojai is still seen as being **beautiful**, **charming**, and **quaint**, so I would expect the physical story to be at the same level or better than in the past.

But, there are also very large differences between the past and the present in the Ojai answers, almost all of which seem to relate to the volume of people. Some of this was seen as good, and some not. The good are words like **vibrant** and **bustling**. The bad are mentions of **traffic**, **crowded**, **busy**, and being **touristy**.

MO Quaintness



Ojai Charm



You can probably guess the upcoming question from the workshop: What words did people want to hear describe their commercial districts in the future? See the results on the next two pages.

WHAT WORDS DO YOU MOST WANT TO HEAR DESCRIBE **MO** IN THE FUTURE?



WHAT WORDS DO YOU MOST WANT TO HEAR DESCRIBE **OJAI** IN THE FUTURE?



The MO word cloud on page 8 has several themes, some of which relate to other parts of the story framework. The first is that they want to stay true to their roots as a real, **local**-serving, **unique** working-class **community**. This is represented by words such as: **community**, **local**, **friendly**, **diverse**, **authentic**, **funky**, **eclectic**, and **affordable**. These wishes for the future can take physical form in the type of housing that gets built, or the sorts of businesses recruited to populate storefronts.

People in MO want the physical environs to be **safe, inviting**, and appealing to **pedestrians**. Currently, with the rural nature of the district and its lack of sidewalks, there are many folks who would not feel comfortable walking around the district, even though traffic flow is not really heavy.

Survey-takers and workshop attendees wanted MO to be more **vibrant, thriving**, and offer more **events** in the years to come. This means more people in the community out and about, which contributes to building community connection *and* economic health.

Restaurants came up, which is not a surprise. People want more and new restaurant offerings in almost every community! And lastly, notice how big the word **Ojai** was. It's very difficult to talk about Meiners Oaks without MO Towners thinking how they are relating to Ojai, comparing to Ojai, benefiting from or being negatively impacted by Ojai... you get the idea.

Speaking of which, Ojai's desired future words maintained some of the same core words about characterization we saw in the other word clouds: **beautiful** and **charming**, and to a lesser degree **quaint**. This time though, **vibrant** was very large, as were **friendly, welcoming**, and **small town**. In other words, people want economic activity, but they still want to feel connected and a part of Ojai, which is sometimes hard to do when there are so many tourists.

A word making a new appearance in a major way is **sustainability**. Also making bigger appearances are **affordable, walkable, accessible**, and **diverse**.

And lastly, **restaurants** again! Remember, food service businesses are the only establishments that showcase people in a commercial district. These are the spots where we have permission to hang out — they offer a multi-sensory experience, and they let us rub shoulders with our community.

Ojai: Food Is Love



MO: Restaurant Hang Out!



There are many areas of physical story that have an impact on economic performance in districts, but four of the most important are roads, sidewalks, buildings, and windows. So let's look at these in both Ojai and Meiners Oaks. Additionally, I will touch on physical communications, as well.

Roads

These are the fundamental circulatory system for a district and they have a large influence over commerce in several ways:

- *Speed.* Faster traffic is detrimental to small businesses, downtowns, and Main St environments because it does not allow drivers to interact with the commercial offerings. When speed is paramount, you are creating a pass through place, not a drive around and circulate place. Also, higher speed roads are noisy and unsafe, discouraging outdoor dining and pedestrian circulation, all of which impacts brand and sales per square foot.
- *Connectivity.* A circulatory system for a commercial district is most efficient when it is part of a grid. The more ways there are to move around a place, the more permeability it has, and the more you can encourage cross pollination between businesses—the life blood of downtown and Main St commerce.
- *Appearance.* The brick & mortar experience happens long before someone sets foot in an individual business. If the road is unappealing looking, then it makes the entire district less appealing, which colors people's perceptions of the business offerings.
- *Multi-Modality.* The more ways people can circulate around a place that don't involve a car, the more it creates an environment that encourages people to interact with each other and businesses on offer. This builds community, showcases people, and creates vibrancy. If it is uncomfortable to walk along, cross, or bike, you are costing your district sales.



Road Appearance Matters! (Canby, OR)

Let's look at the state of the streets in Meiners Oaks and Ojai, beginning with MO.

Meiners Oaks

The main drag through the commercial district in Meiners Oaks is El Roblar Dr. It is a classic rural road commercial district. The characteristics of this type of district are that the street features a narrow width of two-lane traffic that moves pretty slowly—all of which is good! A rural road commercial district also usually features a wide variety of uses: light industrial, residential, retail, restaurant. The whole gamut. This can be a strength, if all of those uses are visually engaging.



West El Roblar Dr

It's also common for rural road commercial districts not to have sidewalks. While this can be a distinguishing feature, it can also discourage cross pollination and circulation between nodes by pedestrians.

The key commercial nodes on El Roblar are shown below, as are the major entry points to the commercial districts.

MEINERS OAKS ROAD IDENTITIES AND KEY ENTRIES



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Presently, East El Roblar Dr is not very walkable. There are very few businesses that are focused on walkers, and many that are light industrial in nature. Even the Ace Hardware, a community mainstay, has its entry oriented on the parking lot, not on the street. In fact, there are no windows in the Ace Hardware building on Roblar at all. The most active business on this stretch of El Roblar is Coffee Connection, pictured to the right.

The entry to Meiners Oaks at the intersection with the Maricopa Highway is problematic as a gateway to MO. This entry, combined with the mix of uses, empty lots, and lack of pedestrian-focused businesses that greet visitors on East El Roblar Dr might discourage someone from further exploring Meiners Oaks because it seems to be working hard not to get our attention.



Coffee Connection in MO

The west entry into town at La Luna Ave is more bucolic and picturesque, segueing to charming residences, and then to commercial. This is arguably the most appealing entrance.

The central entrance to the commercial district at S Lomita Ave puts drivers right in the mix of the commercial district, and directly on the east side of the districts best stretch of active, ground floor commercial uses. However, this gateway is not very encouraging of visitors to remain and explore Meiners Oaks, and it certainly doesn't visually entice drivers to make the left turn to the commercial district.

There is no designated bike infrastructure on El Roblar Dr.

Downtown Ojai

The main entries into the core of downtown Ojai are to the east and west of the city core on State Highway 150, which becomes Ojai Avenue in the center of town. The east entry into the commercial area of Ojai has a classic mid-century corridor identity as a road. This is a common identity for commercial districts on rural state highways on the edge of downtown. The mid-century corridor characterization includes a mix of commercial uses in smaller, one-story buildings that often boast a fair amount of parking. Parking lots are dominant visual elements on mid-century corridors, usually located to the front, side and/or back of structures. The configuration of the road is three lanes: two lanes for through traffic in each direction, and a center suicide lane for turning. (Often, the lane configuration alone is enough to change the identity from rural road to mid-century corridor.)

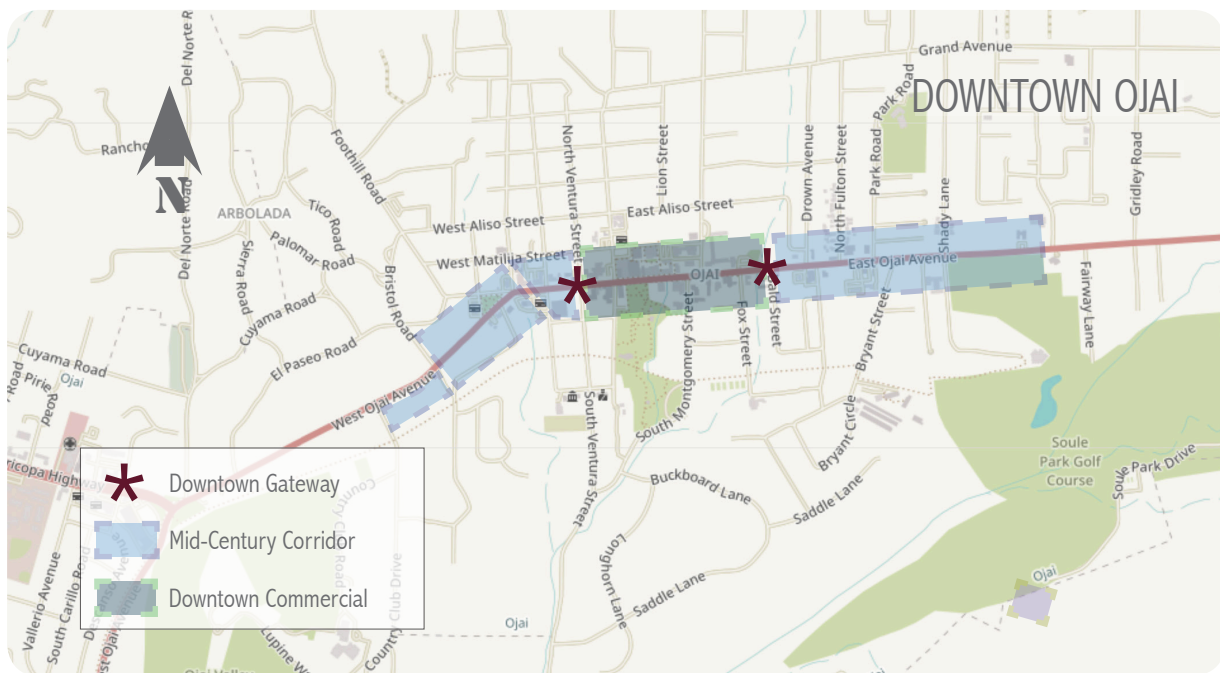
Commercial activity to the west of downtown also has a mid-century identity, with a mix of building types, uses, sizes, and many more buildings surrounding by parking, or built recessed from the street. These are not pedestrian roads, and they are not areas where you see people walking between businesses. There are many essential and local services located along these corridors typically, and that is true of Ojai.

The configuration of the road leading up to the west entry also is three lanes: two lanes for through traffic in each direction, and a center suicide lane for turning.

There is no bike lane infrastructure in the approach to either downtown entry.

In the map shown below, the road identity changes to downtown commercial where there is visible on-street parking (on one side of the street), where there are cross walks, where there are decorative amenities on the sidewalk, where there are shorter blocks with gridded intersections, and where the building form is more intensely located close to the street without as much visible parking. All of these physical characteristics inform visitors they are on a downtown road! Having said that, there is room for improvement in the public realm in the form of public art, landscaping, decorative street lighting, etc.

OJAI ROAD IDENTITIES AND DOWNTOWN GATEWAYS



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Buildings

In a store, it's essential to create a compelling exchange between fixtures and products. Products are what a store sells, and fixtures are the equipment that cradle, display, house, and show off the products. These display devices can be utilitarian, or they can actually help create ambience and mood, showcasing merchandise in a compelling and meaningful fashion.

In the picture to the right, you can see the importance of fixtures. These pears feel very “farm fresh” because they are sitting on a country-inspired fixture. If these were sitting on a plastic table surrounded by Styrofoam, the produce would not appear to be nearly as fresh.



Fixture Makes Pears “Farm Fresh”

In a store, the interplay between products and fixtures is essential for driving sales and creating brand connection. In a downtown, the same is true. Only this time, the fixtures are the buildings and the products are the businesses.

And when it comes to a building's role in telling a story for a successful downtown or Main Street, it's about both quality and quantity.

Quantity. Is there a sufficient concentration of buildings built right up to the sidewalk, right next to each other, without parking lot interruption?

Density of offerings, is important in both a store or a downtown. Shoppers in a store do not want to see big blank spots with no fixtures or merchandise. Similarly, walkers in a downtown do not want to see blanks in the physical environment, such as inward-facing buildings, ugly buildings, or vacant lots. A store with a lot of blanks makes shoppers leave, and so does a downtown with a lot of blanks.

A critical mass of interconnected buildings tells a physical story of vibrancy and excitement, a story that can be broadcast by the district 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It's a story that is enticing to pedestrians, which is important because it is the cross pollination between businesses that happens by people on foot that drives economic success in a downtown.

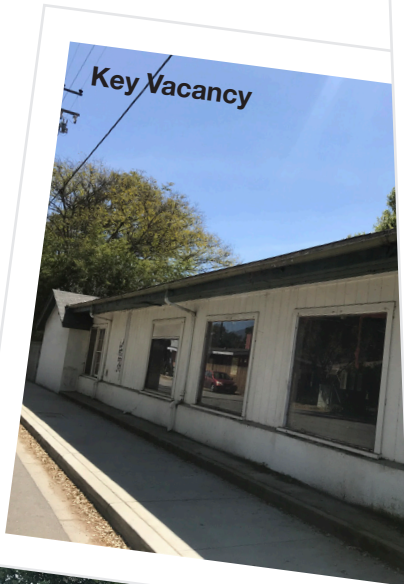
Quality. Does each building contribute to or detract from downtown's brand? If each building isn't doing its level best to create a positive district experience and get customer attention, then money is being left on the table a district.

Commercial districts should be asking themselves: is every individual building contributing to the overall brand of a place, and are those buildings creating a framework for tenant success? Great buildings can make a downtown district and ugly buildings can break a Main St district. The blunt way to say it is: *How Fixtures Look Really Matters.*

Meiners Oaks

In the case of building execution, a picture is really worth a thousand words! Please see images from Meiners Oaks below:

MEINERS OAKS BUILDINGS



A quick review of some of the physical stories being told by buildings in Meiners Oaks.

- **No Strong Architectural Theme.** Other than a mid-century feel, there is no real unifying design theme or era for the buildings in Meiners Oaks. Honestly, this is a huge plus, because it means the sky is the limit! My favorite kind of building is what I call the “Ugly Box”—they are a blank canvas upon which a community can express all of its funky and eclectic spirit.
- **Inward and/or Parking Lot Facing.** Almost none of the buildings on East Roblar, appear to be trying to engage the street, tell a story, or establish district brand. Most turn their back or shoulder to the street in some way.
- **Empty Lots/Parking Lots.** Again, East Roblar is missing the quantity of buildings needed to develop a critical mass of offerings that would constitute a district feel.
- **Exterior Lighting.** There was not a lot of building lighting on the exterior of structures to make pedestrians feel safe, to frame individual spaces and/or buildings, or to add visual interest. Pools of light create drama and highlight building features, when implemented correctly.
- **If I Can See It, It's a Front.** A by-product of being a rural commercial district is that there is a plethora of stand-alone buildings. That means there are structures where the sides and backs are just as visible as the fronts.(As opposed to traditional downtown zero lot-line development where structures are built next to one another, ensuring that side and back walls are not visible.) In a commercial district, if a customer can see any part of a building, then it is contributing, or detracting from the experience of being in your district. Everything visible needs to be treated as a “front”. Meiners Oaks is dominated by unadorned walls on the sides and the backs of buildings, often with a mix of building services like trash and recycling very visible.
- **Art.** The mural on the side of the Mini Mart and the Coffee Connection Sign are nice, but that is all attempting to vie for my attention on East El Roblar. There are a few murals in West El Roblar, one of which is absolutely spectacular, pictured to the right.
(Please note the very friendly person waving at me after picking up take out. This perfectly encapsulated the friendly, community atmosphere in Meiners Oaks.)



This Is a Gorgeous Mural... Roar!

- **Interiors with Bad Lighting.** Lighting is the secret sauce for a great brick and mortar experience. Many of the buildings in Meiners Oaks had blue spectrum, dated light fixtures that were a) not creating a great mood while businesses are open; and, b) not showcasing businesses and the building at night when establishments were closed.
- **Outdoor Seating.** A few of the outdoor seating areas are really fabulous, but most of them are sort of invisible! This is a slow moving street. We should see more people when in Meiners Oaks, and outdoor seating is a great opportunity to accomplish that.
- **More Color!** It is the job of commercial district structures to get our attention. A Main St edifice should be highlighted to draw the eye to interesting architectural features. Commercial buildings must set a dramatic stage for success for the business tenants that call them home. If everything is some vague, tasteful, and/or forgettable shade of beige, then none of those things is being accomplished. Currently Meiners Oaks is using a very bland color palate, with a few notable exceptions, shown below:

A FEW SPLASHES OF BUILDING COLOR IN MO



Downtown Ojai

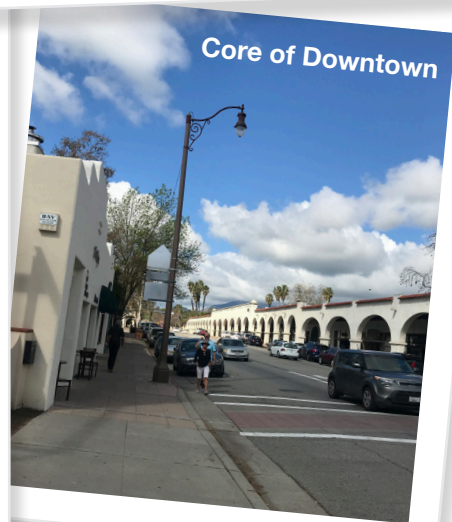
On the following page, please find images of buildings in downtown Ojai.

Unlike Meiners Oaks, there is a very strong visual Spanish Colonial/Mission theme. In some places, such as along the arcade, this is very authentic and eye catching. There are other places where this design overlay is less than successful, like the Mid-Century Mission Modern Wells Fargo pictured to the right.



Wells Fargo Mid Century Mission!

OJAI BUILDINGS



A summary of the physical story being told by downtown Ojai's buildings follows below:

- **Theme.** There is a real theme of Spanish Colonial/Mission in downtown Ojai, with white/cream walls and red roofs. This theme has been adhered to with varying levels of success. Some structures are really a nod to mission style superimposed on groovy mid-century buildings. This theme for commercial

infrastructure executes most strongly in the downtown core on Ojai Ave where there is authentic buildings in this style of architecture.

- **Fabu Quantity.** There is a walkable density of buildings in the downtown core that encourage pedestrian circulation. It's important to remember though, that walkers are fickle. They don't want to traverse through areas without activation to get to something else good. That's why the "Signal St Shops" sign is so ineffective, you turn that corner to the right and peek up the road, and you don't see anything that would make you walk up the road, especially at night.
- **Building Front/Parking Lot Back.** Small downtowns where a state highway also plays the role of Main St often have the challenge where traditional downtown buildings front on the highway, and the area behind them gets hollowed out with parking, which destroys the ability of the surrounding grid to participate in commerce. Remember, traditional block grid construction was so effective at encouraging sales because there is no back! Developers would build a series of buildings around the entire block, so all parts of the street were a "front". All of the parking on Matilija St is disrupting the very cross pollination that is the cornerstone of downtown economics.
- **Exterior Lighting.** There are some areas that are well lit with a combination of building and outdoor lighting. In fact, some structures were much more interesting at night than they were during the day because of the drama created by pools of light, such as those areas shown below.



*People Walk to What They See,
Not What They Read on a Sign*

DOWNTOWN OJAI LIGHTING DRAMA



- **Interior Building Lighting.** There is still room for improvement in terms of quality of interior lighting in spaces, both during the day and at night.
- **Residential to Commercial Conversions.** There is enough demand for commercial space in Ojai that residential buildings in commercial use zones are converting to retail, service, and restaurant. There are some challenges supporting foot-traffic based businesses in these conversions because they are disconnected from the pedestrian centers of town. Former homes are most successful for commerce when they host active destination businesses that drive their own foot traffic, because there is a real barrier to popping into residential-use space for walk-in retail customers—no one wants to get that one wrong as a customer!

Businesses

Ojai and Meiners Oaks town centers take their identity from ground floor businesses, which are essentially the products in downtown's store. What types of businesses contribute to identity? Generally those that are local, active, and visually engaging are the key to building economic success.

As a short-cut, we are going to call these businesses “active”. Ideally, active uses are businesses that are a) open to the public; b) have dynamic and interesting windows; c) create multi-sensory experiences; d) are something a pedestrian might frequent; e) use the sidewalk as an extension of their business; f) collaborate and cross-pollinate with other businesses; and, g) are ever-evolving. An economically successful downtown or Main St district is one that always gives customers a new experience!

Active means that I can look at the business from the street, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and get a sense of what the business sells, who its target market is, and what sort of experience it will offer a consumer on the interior. I should get this impression in a few seconds.

In the just-illuminated definition of an “active” business, there are two items that play an outsized role in the physical story of a district, items which every business should execute upon in order to improve sales and district brand:

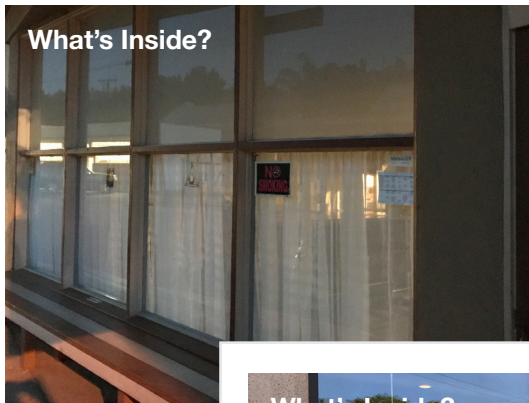
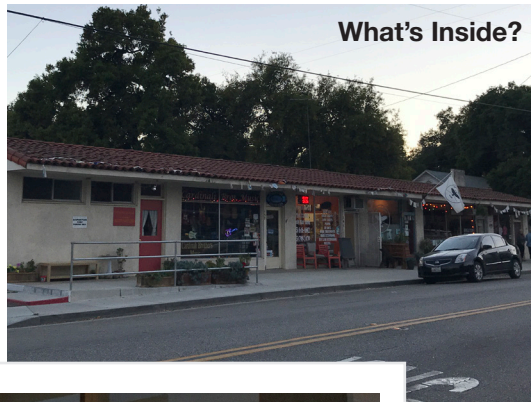
- Dynamic and interesting windows
- A sidewalk that acts as an extension of the business

Let's look at how Ojai and Meiners Oaks are performing in terms of characterization for windows and sidewalks, and in the case of the latter, physical communications as well.

Meiners Oaks

We want to see in your windows MO!! For the most part, during the day, it was impossible to see in most of the businesses in Meiners Oaks. The hardest thing a local business has to accomplish is to get people to cross their threshold. If there isn't something in storefront windows that reflect target customer's interests, and if visitors can't see into a business, they will be much less likely to walk through the door.

WE WANT TO SEE IN YOUR WINDOWS MEINERS OAKS!



There were a few businesses that were delightfully transparent with colorful interiors that showcased people in Meiners Oaks at night, such as Papa Lennon's.

In general though, I had no idea which businesses were open, which were closed, and which were actually vacant. A lack of window transparency and visual interest means that a) customers are not reminded to enter a business; and, b) visitors are less likely to circulate between businesses.

In terms of sidewalk activation in the Meiners Oaks commercial area, there were a few bright spots, like the charming little gateway entry from the sidewalk to the parking lot by Don Lalo's. Or, the tiny house and trailer that serve as bookstores at BookEnds.

One of my favorite examples of activation was the seating area in front of Coffee Connection, shown below. People's desire to see and be seen in their communities is in evidence in this last example. Coffee Connection has a very charming little seating area at the rear of the coffee shop, but when I was there, it was empty. Instead, people chose to lounge in front so they could be a part of the public realm, even though the environment is much less quaint than the back of the space.

PEOPLE WANT TO BE IN THE PUBLIC REALM!

Coffee Connection Front Seating Area



Coffee Connection Rear Seating Area

By and large though, very few businesses are taking the opportunity to create an interactive, expressive, interesting display to draw the eye, to lure visitors, and to entice entry.

Physical Communications

Because the Ojai valley is a tourist destination, there are a lot of physical communications focused on out-of-town visitors. Two observations about this sea of communication:

1. I stayed at the Ojai Retreat and Inn, and these were the publications on offer, shown to the right. Nothing with Meiners Oaks on it anywhere, even though this hospitality center is located in Meiners Oaks. I didn't see much with MO's brand or identity or name on it.
2. There was an overwhelming amount of brochures, magazines, and circulars of various sorts that were available when walking around Ojai. Honestly, it was too much to process. In this era of unlimited information, consumers are looking for careful and targeted curation.



Meiners Oaks, Where Art Thou?

Downtown Ojai

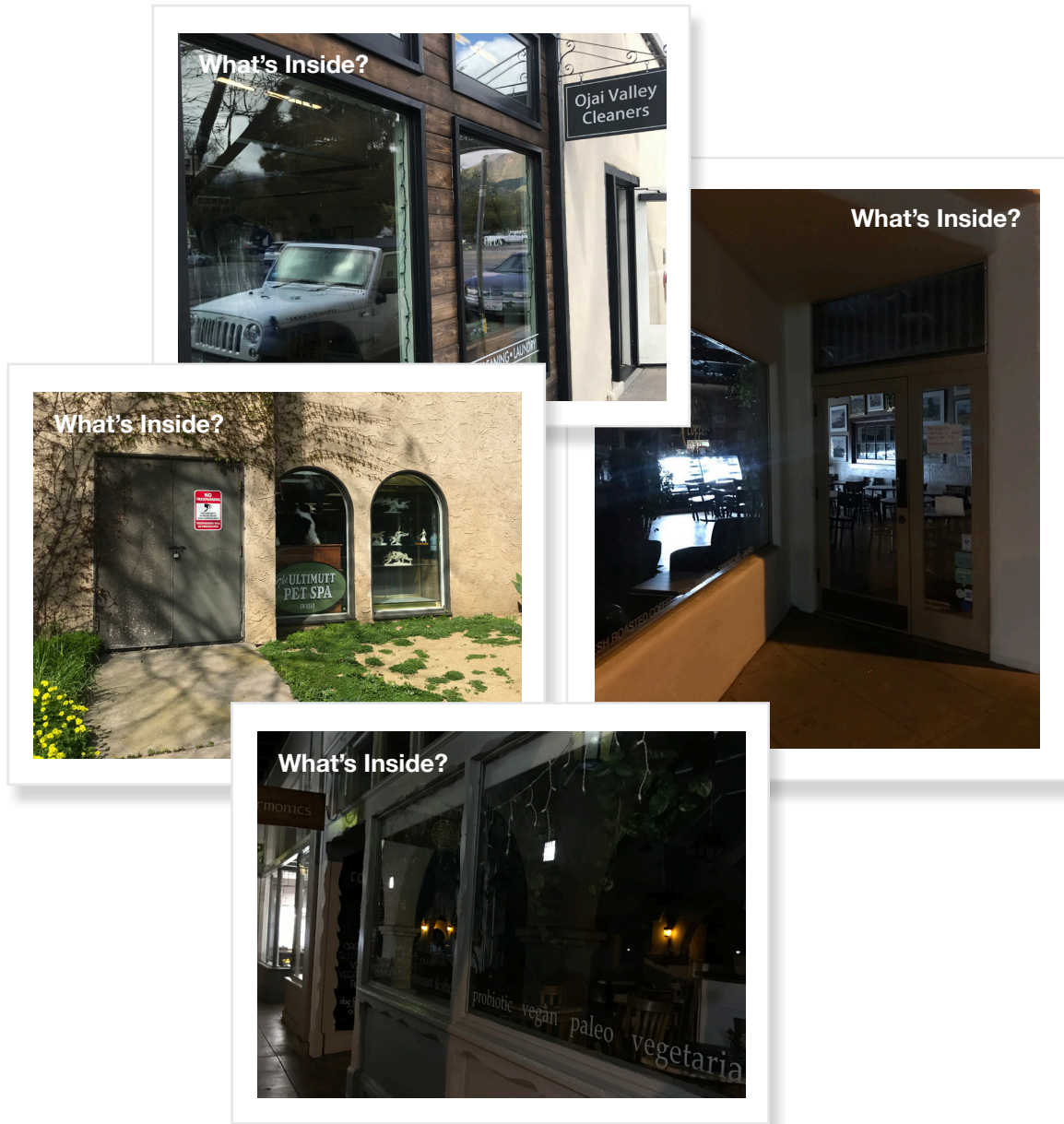
Meiners Oaks isn't the only district with dark windows going on. Downtown Ojai definitely sported a mix of window transparency and execution throughout the district. There were windows I could see in, but not much to engage me as a visitor. There were windows I couldn't really see in during the day. There were windows I couldn't see in during the evening. Sometimes windows were all of these. And sometimes they were one of these. !

Again, windows are what lure people into stores. They are what move people around the downtown between businesses. They are a big part of what establishes the downtown experience, especially at night. If every ground floor business is not doing its best 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to engage passersby, then downtown is leaving money on the table.



Great Window!

LET THERE BE TRANSPARENCY OJAI!



In terms of sidewalk activation in Ojai, I would love to see more products, people, and stuff to touch, smell, taste, and feel. Shopping is a multi-sensory experience. The more people engage with items on the sidewalk in front of businesses, the more they purchase, the stronger brand association they have with the district, and the more they circulate.

MORE OF THIS OJAI: SHOW WHAT YOU DO!

Best Back of Store!



I Understand this Store in One Second!

Objective

The “C” in the CORE Story Framework was the longest section of the framework because the physical story of a commercial district is fundamentally important to its performance. In some ways, the C is also the easiest to understand because it is tangible. The remaining elements of the framework (the “ORE”) are equally important, but they are sometimes harder to grasp. They are the hidden parts of story that are having a big impact, but they are less tangible, and therefore harder to quantify. So let’s take a closer look at the ORE... beginning with Objective.

The “O” in the CORE Story Framework is Objective, and speaks to what a character’s motivation is.

STORY FRAMEWORK

Characterization

Objective

Relationship

Environment

Even though we don't do it consciously, human beings are always making assumptions about what everyone else's objectives are, and what is motivating them. We must have an idea of what someone's objective is if we want to engage with them in a story because we need to know what boundaries define our interactions.

In real life, the absence of having a clear understanding of someone's objective makes us uncomfortable. Human beings feel most at ease with someone whose objective is clear, whether or not we would describe their motivations as good or bad. On the other hand, we do not like interactions where we don't know, or don't understand, the objective of the other parties.

This is true of places, as well. We want to know what motivates a place and what experience they want us to have.

IS YOUR OBJECTIVE TO GET ME TO WALK AROUND?

MO: Farmer & The Cook Is Invisible!



OJAI: Parking Lot in Shopping Core

For a downtown or a Main St, objective refers to understanding the experience that it intends to provide and the role that the district plays in the city as a whole. As consumers, as residents, as visitors we want to grasp what downtown stands for, what it is about, what motivates it. In other words, why should I connect with it?

In order to get a handle on Objective for the two study communities, we started by

asking workshop-goers and survey takers some interesting questions! You can see the answers below and on the following page for Meiners Oaks and Ojai, respectively.

WHAT ARE PEOPLE IN **MEINERS OAKS MOST** PASSIONATE ABOUT?



WHAT ARE PEOPLE IN **OJAI** PASSIONATE ABOUT?

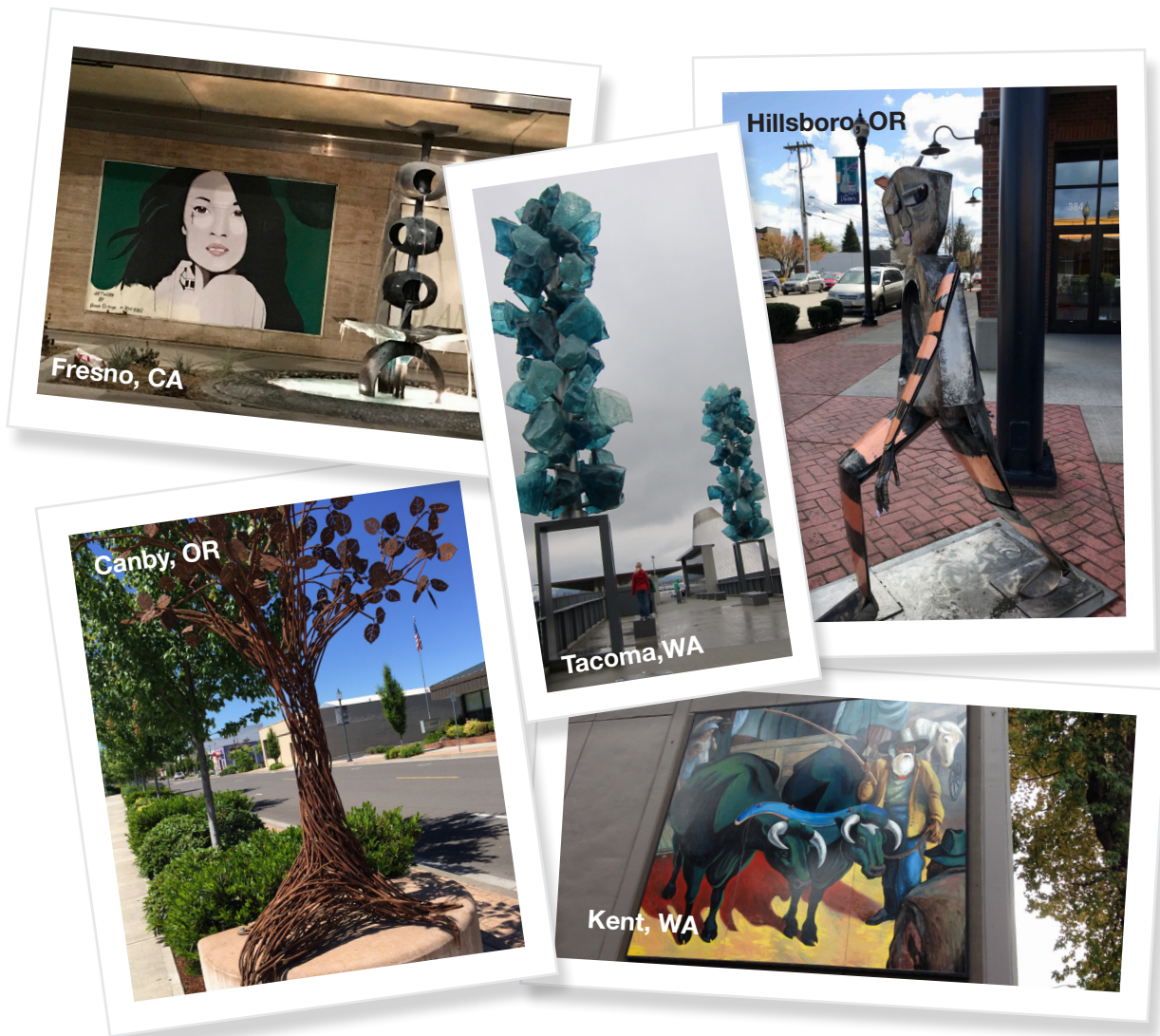


Community is a front and center passion for MO. The next layer of passions in Meiners Oaks revolved around the **environment, arts, organic food, and not being Ojai!** (Please note on the latter, not being something is not an identity. Instead of trying not to be something, communities should strive to implement their own authentic identity.)

Ojai, on the other hand, if you placed **arts** and **artsy** together, they would combine to be the dominant word. Then would be **environment**, and after that, **community**. Ojai is also passionate about **health**, being **healthy**, **music**, and **sustainability**.

All towns should really try to consider how to better incorporate their shared passions into their built environment because these passions are touchstones for everyone. For instance, in both communities, there was a strong and abiding passion for art. Yet, I don't see that reflected in the built environment really at all. I cannot think of anything more fantastic than harnessing all of this creative spirit for people to enjoy in the public realm. Some inspiration is shown below:

EXAMPLES OF PUBLIC ART ON THE WEST COAST



The local creative community can also have a big impact on the buildings that call your commercial districts home.

For example, a few talented retailers in downtown Winnemucca, NV marshalled a group of volunteers, rustled up some paint donations, and single-handedly were responsible for 17 buildings being repainted in a short period of time, changing everyone's perception of downtown and attracting new businesses in the process.

Another good example is shown below. This is from downtown Colfax, CA. This rail town has a small Main St in their town center that features one story buildings with large parapets that make it almost look as if the storefront has a second floor. A few artists in town got together and started to paint these to improve the look and feel of the district! What a difference, shown below.

Colfax Before



Colfax After



The next question we asked our downtown Ojai and Meiners Oaks stakeholders was a tough one, but it's probably my favorite question in the entire story framework: If downtown Ojai/Meiners Oaks were a person, based on everything it presents to the world today, what would you say that person is feeling?" We told people they could visualize the person that these commercial districts would be and describe them if that helped to figure out what the district was feeling. We received a very rich set of answers! The next two pages are direct quotes describing these districts as people. Then, the aggregated answers in the form of word clouds for each district follow.

Home » Communications

Downtown Winnemucca gets a much needed facelift

16 FEBRUARY 2016

Beth Clifton - News4Nevada.Com

Tuesday, February 16, 2016 1:00 AM

The Downtown Business Association (DBA) has given the downtown area a facelift in order to attract more businesses — and more customers — to the downtown area. And it's working, said DBA president Jacy Jackson. Several new businesses have started or moved into the area, including the new coffee shop, Cafe 345, owned by Debbie Palmer, Real Deals Winnemucca, owned by Holly Laird, and Essential Oils and More, owned by Katherine Hall.



Jackson owns Le French Twist Salon and Cheers Tap House and several other downtown properties she leases to other businesses. About three years ago, she and Danielle Flores, owner of Simply Trendy, decided that the downtown area was looking pretty shabby. And shabby doesn't draw people in. So they raised the long-defunct DBA from the dead. Jackson said.

Set Your Creatives Free!

Can't pay the rent—a talented artist who loves to walk and browse, but never quite finishes what she starts, and doesn't remember to get practical things.

...Slightly hippie person who wants to have a successful business, play the guitar and work on their house. I think they feel independent, and yet part of Ojai. They feel welcoming to visitors but comfortable seeing people they were in high school with.

Recovering addict that is trying to put his life back together—full of good ideas but not quite sure if he'll make it.

I was lower class, hard working and authentic. Now, with some influx of money, I hope I can stay real to maintain authenticity. Feeling transformed, but positive.



IF MEINERS OAKS WAS A PERSON...

*Sam
Elliott*

*100%
amazing,
strong,
full of light
and energy*

Like a folk musician on the verge of making a big break. People are starting to enjoy its company, recognize its talent. It used to be an outcast, but now its true colors are shining. It wants to go bigger, but not too big. Keep the funk. Keep true to the culture. Make a little money and gain a little recognition, but stay humble. Sell a few records, but don't go gold.

A teenage boy trying to mature into a man. Unsure of himself, a little shy. A little cocky about not being "Ojai".

She would be matronly, a slight curmudgeon, dressing a bit out-dated. Probably too much pancake make-up, lipstick that was smudged beyond the lips, and likely with one baggy-nylon sagging at the ankle.

...They might be drinking too much beer/wine, and then too much coffee the next day, to counteract the night before. They may not have access to well-paying jobs and a wide, generous donor-pool to fund their transformation dreams. They might be resentful of that major player (first name: "Los", second name: "Angeles") who keeps pushing into their home and increasingly making it near-impossible for a local community to exist.

A bearded hipster that is overly concerned with how others perceive them. Perhaps he's feeling like he can change it all to better suit more people like him.



IF DOWNTOWN OJAI WAS A PERSON...

Downtown Ojai would be a bohemian woman that feels comfortable with her roots, but sometimes not loved by her family. "Why can't I open my arms to strangers without having my family turn their backs on me?" she asks.

Ojai is a Ganna Walska or a Beatrice Wood. Ojai is a grand dame, barefoot in her beautiful skirt and loose lush blouse with her unique jewelry. She has travelled the world, had her adventures and her loves her hardships, but she loves to be home in her garden, in her nest of Ojai doing what she loves.

An artistic redneck farmer who is slightly eccentric, but increasingly trying to be an LA hipster.

An androgynous hippie that sells \$700 hats.

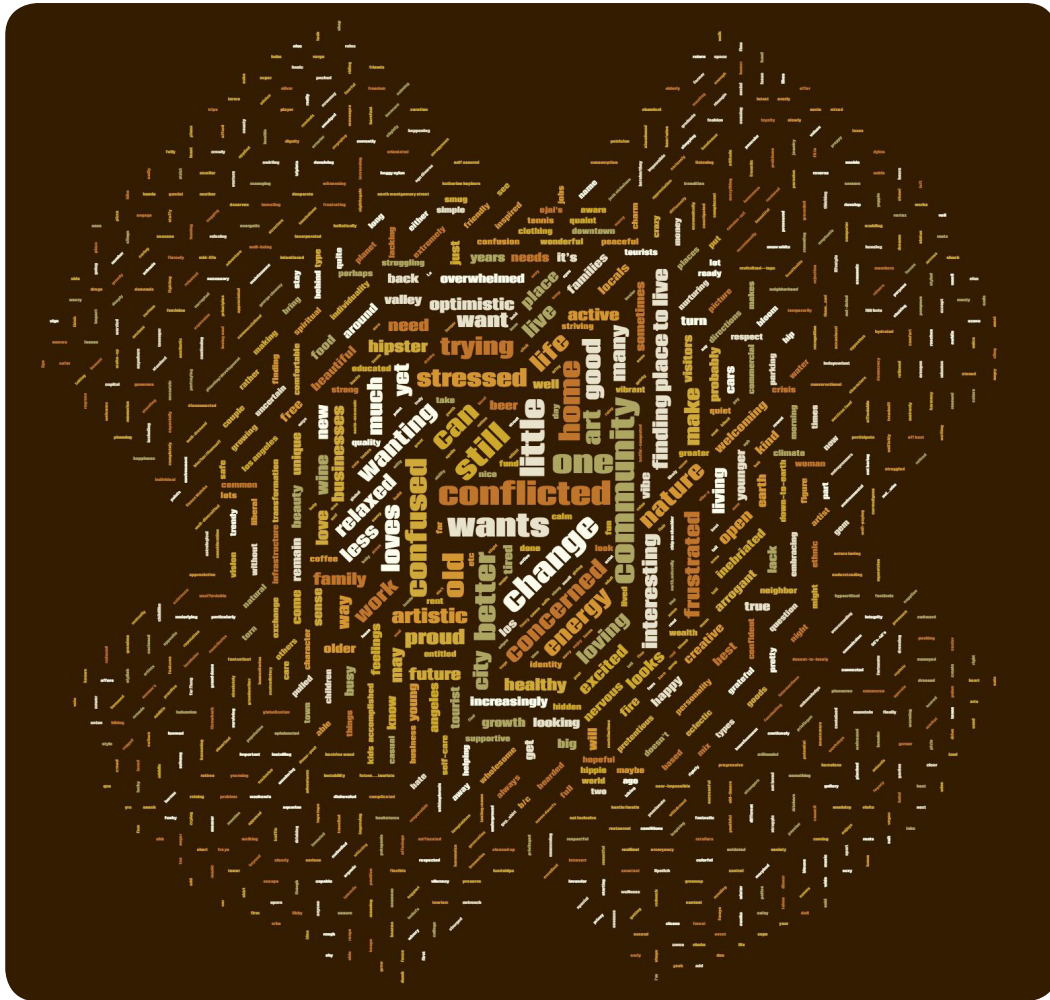
I see a tired guy... shirttail out... who sees occasional people in fancy cars whizzing past and is torn between wanting those cars and resenting them.

For example, Meiners Oaks is an emerging district that is starting to transform, and that idea of transformation is well represented in the descriptions on Page 32, with themes around being a teenager, recovering, having growing pains, remaining authentic, getting a big break.

Now let's look at the aggregated answers for these questions in word cloud format. Below is the Meiners Oaks cloud, and the Ojai cloud is on the following page. This is where we get into more of an emphasis on feeling words.

[illegible]

IF DOWNTOWN **OJAI** WERE A PERSON, BASED ON EVERYTHING IT IS PRESENTING TO THE WORLD TODAY, WHAT IS THAT PERSON FEELING?



There is a notable amount of contrast here. Meiners Oaks does not generate as much traffic, name recognition, sales per square foot, or tourism, but as a district, it is emoting much more optimism than Ojai. This might be a surprising finding for some!

MO's big mentions were **hard-working, happy, special, proud, laid back, real, independent, strong,** and **relaxed.**

Ojai's biggest mentions revolved around being **stressed, conflicted, concerned, finding a place to live, and frustrated**. There was a ring of more positive words around this core tension that included: **proud, loving, trying, optimistic, and relaxed**.

Relationship

The third item in the CORE Story Framework is Relationship. In traditional storytelling, we use relationships to tell readers something about a character. You can tell a lot about a person by the relationships they maintain, and the same can be said for towns. What are your most popular events? The most beloved businesses? Who in the community connects with downtown? Who doesn't? Who is moving into the community? Who is moving away? How are the public and private sectors working together?

Relationship is usually the most overlooked element of the framework, but it's vitally important because at the end of the day, a downtown or Main Street is all about people. Creating economically sustainable communities requires active collaboration between the private and public sector to interconnect businesses and help shoppers develop strong brand relationships with businesses, as well as the district as a whole. The latter is especially important if there is a tourism focus to the economy.

Before we dive into relationship for the two study communities, it's worth noting that branding and identity-building is fundamentally about how we are building relationships. So let's look at some of the fundamentals of branding place... or building relationship to place!

Branding Is Relationship

Understanding who is relating to a place, and what they are relating to has obvious implications to economic development strategies. Strengthening connections to who already relates, and forging new connections with new markets are all about relationship. Likewise, a downtown or Main St should be an authentic reflection of the fabric of the community in which it resides.

Good branding and relationship building for place has four root principals:

1. Marketing is not bragging.
2. Never forget your audience.
3. Build from authenticity.
4. Don't shy away from conflict/tension.

STORY FRAMEWORK

Characterization

Objective



Environment

Marketing Is Not Bragging

It is tempting when marketing anything, a product or a place, to believe the best plan of attack is to tell people how fantastic it is. This is not a good sales technique. Generally, as consumers, we want to decide for ourselves what is the most fantastic product or the most wonderful place: we don't want to be told.

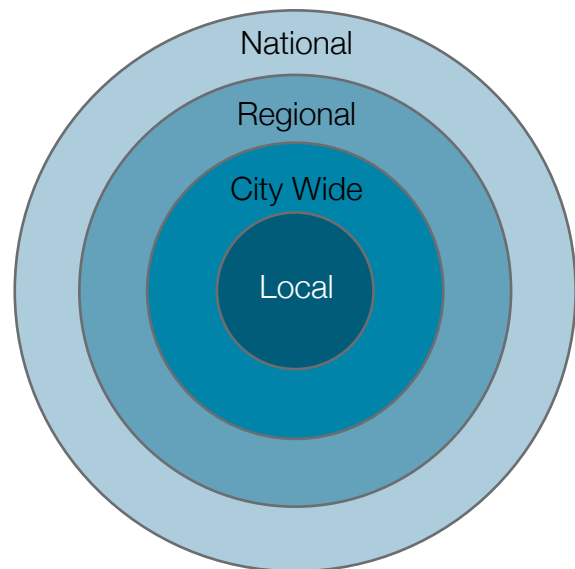
This is a common problem with city tag lines, illustrated by Spokane's, which is "Near Nature, Near Perfect." Or, the Corvallis tag line, which is "Most Innovative City in America."

Branding as bragging is not effective storytelling because instead of building relationship, it provokes these types of reactions:

- ✦ Prove it!
- ✦ I want to judge for myself.
- ✦ This bragging better pan out.
- ✦ What am I going to have for dinner tonight? (Checking out.)
- ✦ I don't like them very much.

Audience

It is nearly impossible to develop campaigns that work for all audience rings: local, city-wide, regional, and national. For example, if Massachusetts were to launch a campaign touting themselves as a great destination for outdoor recreation, that's something that might work with the three innermost rings. But, it wouldn't work on much of the national audience, the fourth ring. It is unlikely that outdoor enthusiasts from Montana, Colorado, or Oregon are going to trek to Massachusetts to go kayaking.



Indeed, it is often true that the way a place might be relevant to one ring, such as locals, is completely different than how it might be relevant to another ring,

such as regional. As a general rule of thumb, it is best to focus first on the inner rings, stressing authenticity, and then work outward, unless tourism is a primary industry. If you are a tourist economy, then the brand for your offerings focused on out-of-town visitors will be very different than the brand connections you build with local and regional guests.

Authenticity

A place's genuine identity should inform all aspects of its story and should impact everything from economic development to land-use.

Take the city of Las Vegas. This was a city founded by the Mafia to provide illicit entertainment for adults—gambling, the lounge scene, and vice. It thrived for quite some time. But, by the late 1980s, the entire gaming/hospitality industry was suffering, except for one hotel/casino, which was performing above all others: Circus Circus.

Because of the success of this family-friendly concept, many hotel-casinos on the Las Vegas Strip began implementing a kid-centric business model and, however improbable it may seem today, looked to parents and children as the growth market for their future. Roller coasters, arcades, and elaborate pools abounded. Despite these efforts, Las Vegas foundered even more through a large part of the 90s.

The next reinvention of Sin City was really a return to its authentic roots: adult entertainment. This time though, they expanded options for visitors beyond the illicit, adding classy, big name singing acts, Broadway shows, Cirque de Soleil, and actual nightclubs (following the death of the lounge scene) for younger and hipper tourists.

Following this return to the city's genuine beginnings, a brilliant tag line was developed, which nearly everyone knows: "What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas." This resonates because it is authentic. It is authentic because it is true to both the past and present of the city, focusing on adult entertainment with a tinge of the illicit. It is also laser focused on the national market, not locals or regional folks. Gaming and entertainment marketing for locals is very different, with a strong Country & Western vibe.

Tension/Conflict

What would you think if I told you this story: "A sleeping man woke up thirsty, got out of bed, obtained a drink of water, and returned to sleep."

Not horribly interesting.

One of my favorite examples comes from the “Don’t mess with Texas!” anti-litter campaign that was designed to motivate young males to stop throwing trash out of their cars on highways in the Lone Star State. It was fantastically effective, but it also grew into so much more, becoming literally the state motto, because it resonated with one commonality found in the heart of nearly every Texan, and that is a fanatically strong sense of pride in their state. So, it meets the authenticity test. And, if you notice, there’s a lot of tension here. It essentially says, we’re so proud of our State, we’ll give you a beat down in its name. There’s nothing perfect or pretty about this tag line.

WHO RELATES TO MEINERS OAKS?



WHO RELATES TO DOWNTOWN OJAI?



The two biggest themes in regards to who is relating in Meiners Oaks were: **locals** and **different people for different things**. The former is self explanatory, and very positive. The latter had an essential service focus to it. In other words, there are a whole spectrum of people relating to different things, one end might be a resident going to the hardware store for a home improvement project, and the other end might be tourists visiting the Farmer & the Cook.

Downtown Ojai's word cloud, on the other hand, really shows the rift that locals feel over tourism and the divided feelings that exist over the changes that it brings. **Tourists** is the dominant words in the cloud, with **tourist** and **visitors** prominent as well. When you take all of these together, it's an overwhelming response. There were smaller representations of **locals** and **residents** in the responses, but ideally, this relationship will improve and **increase** over time. **Hipsters** and **young people** in general were regarded as relating (but not necessarily kids). **Restaurants** and food are the most relatable businesses mentioned, which is common too. Multi-sensory experience that involves hanging out with your community... what's not to love?

WHO DOES NOT RELATE TO MEINERS OAKS?



WHO DOES NOT RELATE TO **DOWNTOWN OJAI**?



Meiners Oaks felt that a wide variety of people did not relate to their commercial district. Largest among them were **tourists** and people from **Ojai**. Also identified as not relating were **families**, **wealthy** folks, and **seniors**. On the latter, the lack of sidewalks and perception of it being unsafe were both cited as reasons why.

Ojai's "not relating" word cloud is almost a complete inverse of who is relating. The group most not relating to downtown Ojai were **locals**, **local**, **residents**, **community**, and **kids**... which are basically all referencing the same thing. Also mentioned as not relating were **lower-income** demographics.

Environment

Last up in the story framework is Environment. We all know the expression that context is everything. Well, its true. Context is everything. If you told a first date story that took place at a baseball game, you would make one set of assumptions about the characters. If you changed just the context of that first date story, from a baseball game to say... a church, well, your perception of these characters would change a lot.

Some elements of environment can be changed for a place, and some can't. For example, let's imagine a suburban community that has a bit of a downtown, but its network of streets lack a grid. It would be possible to change the environment of that downtown by creating a street grid for it, and blasting some streets through.

On the other hand, you cannot change where your town or your city is located, and the seasonality and market forces that go with that location. Since you can't change a place's "where," understanding it and leveraging it are paramount for planning and economic success.

In considering environment, districts should be asking themselves these questions: What is the setting for your district? Does your environment detract from, or contribute to what people expect your district to be? What sorts of economic pressures arise out of your environment? How does your existing context relate to neighboring environments in your region?

STORY FRAMEWORK

Characterization

Objective

Relationship



Two important considerations for smaller communities with a tourism focus are:

1. Does the context for your commercial district allow you to maximize vibrancy and sales?
2. What about your environment attracts visitors? What is it offering that is different or distinct from their day-to-day context?

As to the former, a small town downtown or commercial district is an environment that operates maximally when it has a specific type of form: a) organized on a grid; b) a commercial/mixed-use area with a collection of smaller buildings built next to each other, right up to the sidewalk; c) businesses that are oriented toward the street/sidewalk; and, d) not a lot of off-street parking. In order to be economically successful, downtowns and rural commercial districts have to leverage these contexts to provide distinct walkable and bikeable experience for visitors, whether they be local or tourist.

SMALL TOWN DOWNTOWN & MAIN STREET CONTEXTS



Small Downtown Context (Charlotte, MI)
Compact Form with few Parking Lots



Small Downtowns and Main Streets
Pedestrians Drive Sales/SF

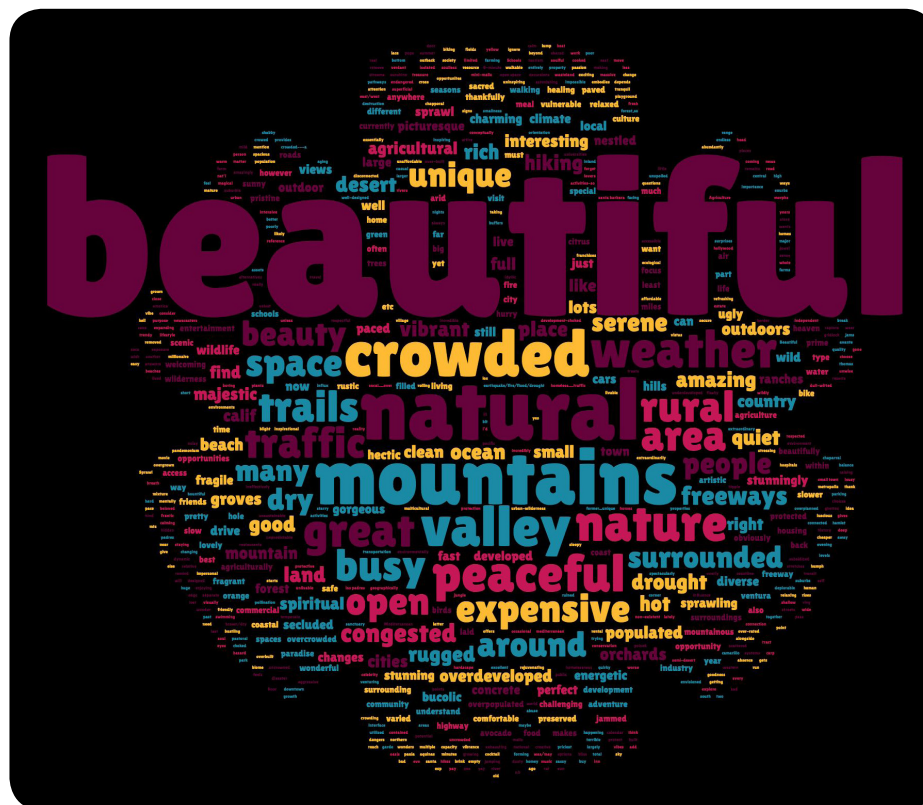
In terms of environment and tourism, when a smaller community begins to attract a lot of travelers, the sheer volume of people visiting will begin to exert influence that can outweigh local influence, causing the district to conform more closely to visitors needs and/or expectations. The trick for these tourist-focused communities is to intentionally identify the contextual elements that are special and valuable to both locals and tourists, and amplify those.

So let's look at words to describe the Ojai Valley context and the Southern California context in the following two words clouds from MO and Ojai's perspectives.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE ENVIRONMENT THAT HOUSES
MEINERS OAKS AND THE ENVIRONMENT OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA?



HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE ENVIRONMENT THAT
HOUSES **OJAI** AND THE ENVIRONMENT OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA?

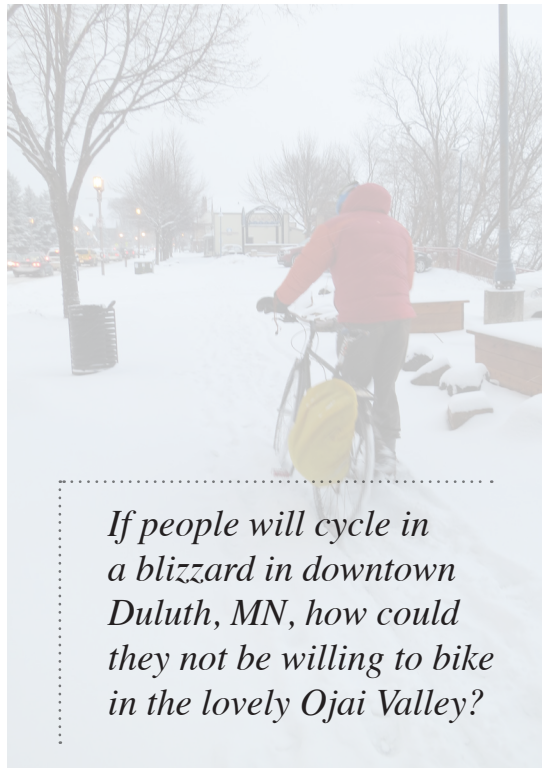


Both groups were very united and vocal about the **beautiful natural** environment of the Ojai Valley. They love it for being **peaceful, rural**, and a place to experience **nature**.

On the flip side, Southern California was described as being **crowded**, having a lot of **traffic**, having a **sprawl** development pattern, for being **expensive**, sporting **congested** roads, and having a lot of **freeways**.

A fundamental takeaway from this is that people are getting away to Ojai, they are attracted to Ojai, because it is almost the exact opposite of many of the negative aspects of living in the more populated areas of Southern California.

So, as you consider ways to tackle the negative aspects of tourism, especially when it comes to parking, traffic, etc., I would say that as a community, you shouldn't be afraid to use congestion and parking policy to get people out of cars and walking/biking/bussing to downtown amenities. Being able to live your daily life without a car is not something you can do in most of Southern California, but it is something a visitor can do when they are in the Ojai Valley!



*If people will cycle in
a blizzard in downtown
Duluth, MN, how could
they not be willing to bike
in the lovely Ojai Valley?*

FINDINGS SPOTLIGHT

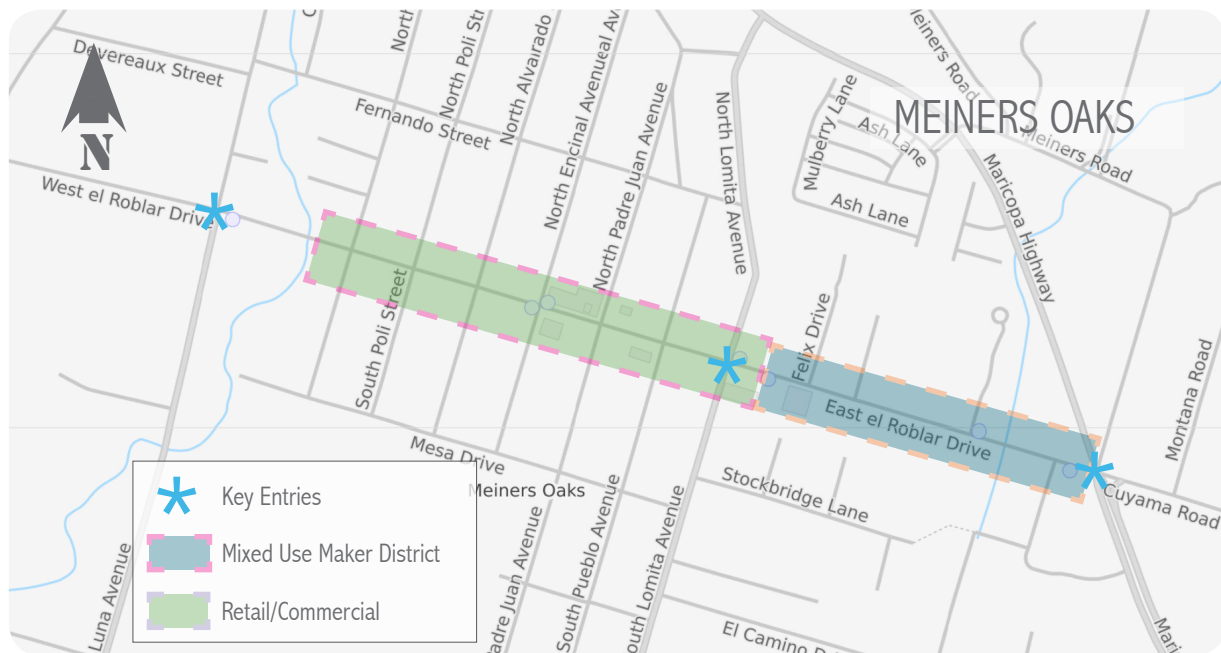
Meiners Oaks, CA

Identity Summary

Meiners Oaks is more of a rural Main St than it is a small town downtown. While it does have a modest grid immediately surrounding the commercial areas of W El Roblar Dr, most of that is taken up by detached, single family homes. So it is essentially a Main St of concentrated commercial activity along East and West El Roblar Dr.

MO Town is passionate about community, it wants to improve economically, but it definitely does not want to turn into Ojai. Being accessible, remaining true to its working class roots, and maintaining its sense of authenticity is important to Meiners Oaks. And, it sees opportunity in reestablishing stronger connections to its Latino heritage and culture.

The eastern portion of El Roblar is pretty disconnected from walkable commercial activity, and represents a big opportunity reflect Meiners Oak's values in a way that stays in keeping with being a real place that cares about equity of opportunity. For example, it could be a maker district for local entrepreneurs and feature mixed-income rental housing that would help alleviate the housing crunch for minimum wage service workers that are the engine of the tourist economy. See below.



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Please note, there are fantastic ways to do mixed-income housing on small lots that the community loves. To the right is a design by Kevin Cavanaugh of Guerilla Development that fits on a 5,000 SF lot. It received a high level of support from the neighborhood where it is being built, and features three commercial spaces, two market-rate one-bedroom apartments, and 11 single room occupancy units, some of which are going to house working homeless, and some which will be market rate.



*Mixed-Income, Mixed-Use Can Be Great!
Image Courtesy of: www.guerrilladev.co*

The western part of El Roblar is where the majority of the walkable amenities currently reside. This is where everyone should be working from the “improve what you have” playbook. It doesn’t take large amounts of money or time to jazz up the great happenings already on offer in Meiners Oaks.

Framework Highlights

- **Meiners Oaks, Where the Ojai Valley Gets Real!** While in Meiners Oaks I had folks wave at me while taking pictures, chatted with people on the street and at tables, overhead conversations about weddings at BookEnds, and listened to an in depth discussion of Brexit at the Coffee Connection. MO was brimming with exchanges between people who knew each other, and people visiting the community. That is a fundamental part of Meiners Oaks brand. Being accessible. Not being fancy. Being local. Being a place to connect. Ultimately, being real is a core part of your brand and why tourists will want to visit you, because they get to dip their toe in your community and chat with real people from MO... for a moment, they can experience being a part of your lovely community. To be clear, this does not mean that nothing ever changes in the built environment! Instead, it means you want to welcome new development that continues to keep Meiners Oaks real. That could mean service worker housing for people who make minimum wage, as mentioned above. That could mean entry level for sale houses for public school teachers. That could mean commercial projects that offers MO maker space with a shared retail store. That could mean a commercial kitchen for value-added food entrepreneurs.
- **The Trolley Bus!** The single biggest underutilized asset in the Ojai Valley is the trolley bus. As we discussed earlier, marketing is about relationship. In brick & mortar districts, one of the



Love, LOVE, Love the Trolley Bus

things we want to do is interconnect and build relationship between activities, offerings, districts, stores, etc. *The trolley bus is already doing that!* It just needs to do a better job of showing people where it goes and how often it runs. There is a real opportunity to bring tourists into MO with minimal traffic/parking impact by doing a better job of leveraging this incredible transit asset. (Foreshadowing: Curating stops between Ojai and MO will be a key recommendation in the public sector/agency toolkit!)

- **Not Being Ojai.** When you are the smaller, less affluent little sister to a more well known district that generates more economic activity, it is easy to get bogged down in feeling “less than”, or to try to overly emulate the city with star power. As an example, every time a question was asked about MO, Ojai was a very frequent response, but the reverse was never true. But remember, not being something is not the same as cogently and intentionally telling the world who you want to be and showing them what you stand for. While you want to consider how to leverage your connection and proximity to Ojai, don’t ever lose site of the fact that MO is not tethered to their identity.
- **Agriculture.** Agriculture was not prominent in any word clouds. There is opportunity to establish a closer connection to ag in MO. Below is a picture of a restaurant in Winters, CA that is decorated with fruit crates and tractor parts. They also produce homemade sweet and savory preserves from family recipes. Establishing resources for the production and sale of value added agricultural products is an area of economic development that should be explored.

INTEGRATE AGRICULTURE MORE STRONGLY



Preserve in Winters, California



Reflects Agricultural Heritage

- **Art & Tactical Urbanism.** Show MO's funkiness and love of art with temporary tactical urbanist installations and permanent art installations. For inspiration, Reno has become a permanent home for temporary sculptures developed for Burning Man, shown below left. Or, consider a temporary installation for seating, events, music, or just hanging out, pictured below center in Modesto, CA and below right at a street fair.

PUBLIC ART AND TACTICAL URBANISM EXAMPLES



- **Outdoors.** Over the long term, it would be wonderful if people could take the trolley bus to the western-most stop in Meiners Oaks, cross La Luna, and immediately be on a trail hiking in the Ventura River Preserve. It brings to mind a whole series of sleep away camps located along the Sandy River in Oregon. Most of them were built at the turn of the century, and people from all around the greater Portland Metro area accessed them via Streetcar!

FINDINGS SPOTLIGHT

Ojai, CA

Identity Summary

Ojai is a classic small town downtown in a rural setting. It has a grid. It has a collection of buildings, built up to the sidewalk, next to one another. It has a central park. It has a distinct architectural style. It is walkable. It has a state highway serving as its Main St. It is near an intersection with another state highway. And finally, it has a mix of uses: residential, office, service, retail, and restaurant.

Ojai is a study of juxtaposition. A rural community in a heavily populated southern California region. An economic history that includes oil and agriculture that attracts deeply spiritual people to its east-west valley vortex. An inland destination dominated by coastal tourism. These tensions are part of what make it a magical place! Do not lose them.

The city is currently experiencing growing pains around a single dominant industry that has been fragmenting what is normally a tight knit community. That dominant industry is tourism. Towns heavily influenced by a single industry should always plan for two things: 1) How to leverage the success of the dominant industry to create a more balanced economic ecosystem; and, 2) How to mitigate the curtailment or loss of the dominant industry, if that should come to pass sometime in the future.

There are myriad examples of why planning for the latter is very important, examples that go back as long as a humanity has been creating settlements, but here are two recent examples:

The town of Bisbee, AZ was built on the edge of a copper pit mine, growing into a thriving hub of mining and commerce by the 1880s. One hundred years later, it had to reinvent itself after the mine closed (in 1985).



Copper Pit Mine



Bisbee, AZ

Bisbee has successfully reimagined themselves, leveraging their old west buildings and a creative community to become a very different city, but it was rough going immediately after the mine closed as they had done little to prepare for the eventuality.

The town of Valdez, Alaska has never fully recovered to their pre-Exxon oil spill levels of tourism. In one fell swoop, the tourism and sport fishing industry were destroyed in a town whose name is now synonymous with ecological destruction.

The Ojai Valley experienced this first hand what can happen when a natural disaster impacts a dominant industry when the Thomas Fire ravaged Ventura and Santa Barbara counties, depressing visitation and severely impacting the local community as a result. While tourism has rebounded, it is going to be important moving forward to think about how to use the success of tourism to fund a balanced approach to economic development that will be more resilient in the future.

Framework Highlights

- **Manage the Change!** Given Ojai's context — picturesque location and proximity to large amounts of wealth in the Los Angeles region — the influence of money and high-end tourism coming into the community is likely going to continue for some time. Presently, downtown Ojai is experiencing a boom, attracting the highest commercial rents it has commanded in its long history. The public sector must look at its economic development approaches from new perspectives than it has in the past. There is no “set it and forget it” approach to policy that is going to be a magic bullet. Rather, the public sector and regional agencies are going to have to begin applying a dynamic toolkit where they test new policies, track how they work, and transform their approaches based on data and outcomes.

Please note: a policy that says “We don't want anything to change” will not only fail dismally at stopping change, it will actually have the opposite effect. It will hasten change, the very kind of change that locals and old-timers don't want to see. So everyone's motto should be “*Manage the Change!*” All policies should work backward from the characteristics you love and want to preserve about your community.

- **Heal the Rift.** The fact that many people identified locals as not related to downtown Ojai was troubling, and should be addressed in a variety of ways including:
 - ✧ Traffic and parking mitigation. (This is where the trolley bus can help.)
 - ✧ Family friendly, affordable, and local programming/events in downtown.

- ✧ Discounts for locals.
- ✧ Develop merchant culture that keeps locals in mind.
- ✧ Provide support to help local-serving businesses so they can drive enough sales to remain in a rising rent environment.

➤ **Sustainability.** The passion for sustainability in Ojai is laudable, and remarkable. There are not many small communities that have such a focus on the environment. The many ways in which Ojai is looking to become more resource resilient, especially in regards to fire and water management, even considering it as a source of future revenue, is fantastic. And, it would help serve to balance the economy. Ojai can build upon this passion by looking at how it can reduce vehicle miles traveled and driving's carbon footprint in a few different ways:

- ✧ *Commuting.* There are many high-wage earners leaving the valley every day, and too many low income folks commuting in for service jobs. If your dishwashers and your phlebotomists and your retail workers and your entry level public safety officers cannot afford to live in your community, it is broken. Tackling these broken commuting patterns actually has nothing to do with roads, and everything to do with attracting higher wage jobs and building accessible housing for people making minimum wage. In other words, plan land use around if cars didn't exist — exactly the way all communities were designed at the turn of the century, even small towns.
- ✧ *Tourism.* Drive what you want to see. Shape behavior. Use congestion and lack of parking to get tourists on bikes, walking, and on the trolley bus.

➤ **Downtown Parking Toolkit.** A small town downtown or Main St has to manage parking differently than a strip mall or big box store. Bottom line: prioritize customers for street spaces and encourage alternate transport.

➤ **Dynamic Status Experience.** There are two sides to the status coin — high status and low status. For a place to establish successful brand relationships, it has to work at executing on the great parts of both, achieving dynamic status. You want to create an amazing visual environment that satisfies the high status nature of Ojai's visitors, while retaining the accessibility, ease, and friendliness of a lower status, easy going small local community.

➤ **Agricultural Incubation.** Reconnect to agriculture. Here is an example from a small community that is on the edge of a major Metropolitan Statistical Area with a lot of money, Point Reyes, CA in Marin County. They are a very interesting agricultural community that had a high concentration of

dairy farms. As those farms began consolidating, the region implemented an innovative and successful land trust model to buy development rights from farmers, who used the infusion of cash to move into value added agricultural food production. This region is now one of the leading cheese producers in California, as a result. How can the Ojai Valley become a national powerhouse in value added food wholesale food production?

PROPERTY OWNER TOOLKIT

Of the three groups that impact revitalization, property owners are the most important because they control how buildings look and what tenants go into those buildings. That is game, set and match right there when it comes to economic improvement. How buildings look and what tenants go into those buildings is the actual toolkit for property owners: implementing a vision for their buildings and tenantry to build long-term value.

Looks Matter!

The single biggest area where all property owners can have a big impact on the economics of downtown, and therefore their building values, is through physical story. There are three areas to consider for immediate action by property owners that will make space easier to lease and that will incubate successful outward-facing businesses that create district identity and strong rents. These action items are going to focus on the ground floor, because that is where the identity of a district is almost entirely established. If street-level buildings, businesses, and the public sphere are not working hard to get visitor's attention, those consumers will pass by, leaving everything unnoticed, at best, or disliked, at worst.

There is a fundamental rule for retail commercial districts, whether you are a dentist or a women's clothing boutique: *People form their opinion of a business and your district long before they walk in the door!*

Therefore, the most immediate and highest impact way to improve district brand and experience is to work with each individual building to change the story it tells from the street. This is vitally important because a place tells a story 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, so every space better be telling a great story, all the time, open or closed. Every building should **show** me something about the district, the area, the businesses, and why I might want to stop there as a customer, or why I might want to lease space if I were a business. How buildings look really matters.

The three areas of focus for property owners are listed below:

- Building Interiors
- Building Exteriors
- Parking Lots/Sidewalks

Building Interiors

Subpar interior space is important because the interior experience strongly shapes our perception of a business and its products, and it heavily impacts our mood just as we

are closest to making purchases. The interior of a space also plays a huge role in a) how leasable the space is; and, b) how successful a business will be in a space. In other words, you can take a great business and put them in a horrible looking (or horrible smelling) space, and they will fail. Likewise, you can take a fair business and put it in a rocking space, and it will do well.

Consider the interior of the coffee shop, pictured below left. It is clearly a neighborhood gathering spot and is offering a modern but cozy retail experience on the interior. It's very well done.

You might be surprised to learn that this space is inside a small older little strip mall in Carmichael, CA, pictured below right.



Surprising Strip Mall Interior in Carmichael, CA



The Dated Strip Mall That Houses the Coffee Shop

There are basic elements that create a framework for success in ground floor commercial space, whether it is in a Small Town Downtown district or a Mid-Century Corridor, which is particularly important in districts that are comprised of local businesses.

These basic elements include:

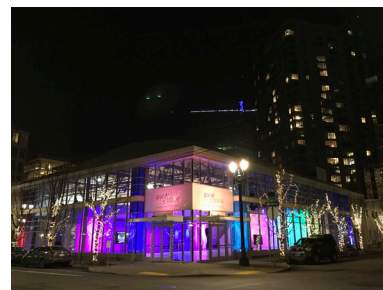
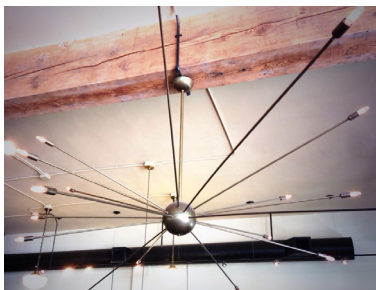
- *Right Size Spaces.* Most long-term vacancies, or less-than-optimally tenanted spaces, or spaces with a lot of turnover, occur in buildings such as dated strip mall/box infrastructure, or in old downtown department stores and banks. Why? Because these are large spaces, larger than the retail/restaurant/active-use market wants to absorb. In order to appeal to the widest possible pool of tenants and uses, spaces need to be designed so they can be divisible down to sizes more likely to be absorbed by the local market: around 1,000 SF is optimal for retail. One of the most important skills in adaptively reusing buildings is dividing spaces into optimally usable spaces that are going to return the most in rent per square foot. The smaller the space, the higher the return per square foot, typically.

- *Tall Ceilings.* Remove low ceilings, be they acoustical tile drop ceilings or old hard lids. Anything that smacks of a 1980s office space ceiling with fluorescent lighting is not providing a distinct brick-and-mortar experience, which is what small businesses must provide in today's retail climate. In studies on human reactions to ceiling height, psychologist Oshin Vartanian of the University of Toronto-Scarborough found that "participants were more likely to judge a room beautiful if it had a high ceiling" and that "part of the appeal of high ceilings seems to be that they capture our visual attention and engage our desire to observe our surroundings." (Source: Fast Company, *Why Our Brains Love High Ceilings*, Eric Jaffe, March 5, 2015.) Both of these characteristics are great for business!

The formula for ceiling success is to rip out false ceilings, expose the roof deck and/or truss structure, and then put insulation above the roof deck or between roof joists.

- *Make Windows Transparent.* Windows are the eyes into the soul of your commercial district. Landlords need to make sure glass is as transparent as possible, and that any window film allows for maximum visibility. (Window film that prevents UV damage and heat gain, but is still fairly transparent is available.)
- *Introduce Great Light.* It's always easier to attract tenants in light, bright cheerful spaces. Especially if you are completing renovations of dated strip malls. And, the interior experience in spaces with great light is always better. So, every owner should consider installing opaque skylights in one-story buildings and installing reasonable baseline light fixtures too. A good rule of thumb is to create lighting in the color range of 3,000 Kelvin or less (this has a more amber character that makes both product and people look good). Also, encourage bulbs with a CRI (color rendering index) as high as you can afford, generally above 90.

EXTERIOR AND INTERIOR LIGHTING IS THE SECRET SAUCE OF MOOD!



Building Exteriors

The four elements needed to execute on a great exterior building experience, that will draw maximum customer attention and loyalty, are listed below. These four items are easy to implement in phases, they can be approached over time, out of cash flow for the private sector, and they provide the biggest district bang for the lowest cost.

- *Color.* There is no cheaper or easier way to bring vibrancy and excitement to a place than by introducing color. When was the last time that someone called you up and said, “Oh my gosh, the coolest building just got painted in our downtown, you have to come see it!” That is exactly what happened with the building pictured to the right. Every building in all of your districts should be using color to show visitors something about their business, about the area, and about the experience they want to provide.



Second Floor Office Space in Concrete Block Bldg

- *Highlight Building Detail.* Every building has interesting elements or unique materials that can be highlighted to make the structure engaging, eye catching, and inviting. This is doubly important on a corridor, where potential consumers are hard to engage. In the example below, you can see a mid-century building painted all white that was largely used as legal offices. The owner of the practice was retiring and was going to begin leasing space. Using color to make the building more appealing, and to highlight building detail, completely changed market perception of the space.



BEFORE: Fresno Housing Bureau



AFTER: The Magic of Paint and Light

- *Transparency.* The hardest thing that any business has to do is get someone to walk through the door, whether it's for the first time or as a repeat customer. This is particularly true for a small business with which we have no familiarity. The bottom line is that customers do not like to enter businesses unless they can see inside, because they want to first understand the experience on offer. So both the store and the merchandise in the windows must appeal to consumers. This lesson is all too often lost with small ground-floor businesses, especially if they have blocked their windows. Consumers should be able to tell whether a store is open or closed, and know what a business actually does by glancing at the windows for a second or two.



Window Transparency at Small Town Optometrist

This idea of transparency is doubly important for food businesses because their customers are unique—their only job is to hang out and the product is multi-sensory! So every restaurant/bar should be showcasing its customers, essentially making them very visible, in order to attract more visitors. And, it makes a district vibrant!

- *Exterior Lighting.* Every place, every building, and every business is telling a story, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Just because a business closes at 5 pm does not mean their responsibility for contributing to the experience of being in the district ends at 5 pm. It is building lighting, tree lighting, product lighting, sign lighting—everything other than street lighting—that tells us a district is safe, a district is welcoming, a district is interesting, a district is open for business.



Seating Area in Former Parking Lot at Night

Parking Lots/Sidewalks

The last area of improvement that property owners need to consider is tackling parking lots and sidewalks—they can be used to advantage, creating identity, generating revenue, and providing a necessary buffer from busy traffic on fast corridors.

In the strip mall redevelopment shown below, they did a great job of making their parking lot and sidewalks engaging from all angles. From the bus stop, which is incorporated into the development, to the street, which has interesting landscaping and a cool rusted metal wall to block out the image of cars being so dominant. It also creates a welcome gateway to those passing by, on foot or by car, with a walkway between the store-sidewalk and the street-sidewalk. And, it used some of the parking spaces in front of the restaurant to create a beautiful outdoor seating area, softening the edges of the hardscape.

STRIP MALL PARKING LOT IMPROVEMENT EXAMPLE

Parking Lot Screen



Integrated Bus Stop



Strip Mall



Walkway



Seating Area



The recipe for improving the parking lot and sidewalk experience is as follows:

- *Engage Both Sidewalks.* One of the challenges of having a recessed building is that businesses and buildings have two sidewalks to engage—the one directly in front of the building (the building sidewalk), and the one directly adjacent to the street (the street sidewalk). To optimize the consumer experience, businesses and buildings have to create a great experience on both.
- *Create a Pedestrian Walkway Between Both Sidewalks.* Every recessed building should have an area for walkers to pass through the parking lot, like the one pictured on the previous page, bottom left. There should always be a visual story that says pedestrians are prioritized, even in parking lots.
- *Create a Store Zone on the Building Sidewalk.* Many older corridor buildings have parking lots that run right up to the edge of the building, as the former auto body shop pictured below did. Generally, with recessed buildings, you want to create a buffer between the parking and the actual stores and businesses by developing a store zone where people can circulate, sample products, maybe go to a food cart, or use as a seating area.

Below is an example of a corridor building removing all of its parking and converting it to seating. This was a typical mid-century auto body shop that was slightly recessed from the street. This boring concrete block warehouse was converted into micro restaurant spaces. Notice, they entirely removed the parking lot in front of the building and created a gigantic store zone that is a shared seating area, which is ever evolving and showcases people!



BUSINESS OWNER TOOLKIT

Both communities have an interesting mix of businesses, but in Meiners Oaks in particular, and in some cases in Ojai, buildings may not be offering a framework for success (remember, the retail experience happens long before someone walks in the door). And, many are not executing on the basics of the most important tool for ground floor businesses: Show, Don't Tell, so that is where we will be focusing.

Biz Toolkit #1: Show, Don't Tell

Every business should pretend that signs are illegal and language doesn't exist. Then, they should consider how they are going to **SHOW** customers what sort of experience they offer, what their business actually is, and why a customer might want to interact with them. Every single ground floor business should *show* us what they do, not try to *tell* us with a sign.

Consider the photograph to the right. This is a dentist's office in a medical tourism town in Mexico where North Americans come for affordable dental work.

Now consider, how do people feel when they go to the dentist? Nervous. How do they feel going to another country to get medical care? Nervous. Do you think they travel there alone? No.

What is this practice showing us to assuage these concerns? It demonstrates success in the finish work, caring and calmness with the color and design, and they have a great place to sit and wait for those accompanying patients here!



Beautiful Dental Office In Mexican Medical Tourism Town

They are showing patients that they are going to take care of everything!

The three most important areas of execution for Show, Don't Tell are:

- Windows
- Lighting
- Sidewalks

Windows

Windows are really the heart and soul of a commercial district. They are the one item that should always be changing and they should always be engaging. Improving windows is usually the cheapest, quickest, and easiest project to improve district brand and get people walking in the door of businesses.

A checklist for window *Show, Don't Tell* execution is below.

- *Can I see your windows?* You would be surprised at how often I have to ask this! It's very common for storefront windows to be blocked by landscaping, by hanging flower baskets, by signage. If you can't even see a storefront window, that should be fixed.



A Linen Store's Window When Closed

- *Can I See in Your Windows Day and Night?* Storefront windows are a 24/7 advertisement for your business, so make sure they look great when you are open, and that they look great when you are closed. This is not only important for businesses, but it's important for districts too, so it always looks inviting, safe, and active no matter what time of day or evening.
- *Do Your Windows Provide Store Transparency?* When you are a small business, and especially when you are a small business on a busy corridor, your prospective customers are unlikely to commit to walking through your door unless they can get a sense of who you are from the exterior. If you build out window boxes, or otherwise block your windows, it will discourage people from dipping their toe in the pool of what your business has to offer!
- *Are your Windows Merchandised Well?* This speaks for itself. If people walk by your window and never turn their head, if they never look in, then you aren't doing it right! Again, windows are where you market your business, no matter what it is. Make sure they are fantastic.
- *Do Your Windows Change Frequently?* At a minimum, every ground floor business should be changing their windows every month, with the exception of restaurants. The latter should just be showcasing people in their windows!

Every street level business should answer yes to every one of the above questions.

Lighting

Light impacts our mood very dramatically. It makes products look either alluring or anemic and it also makes human skin appear either alluring or anemic (an important consideration when selling products that require customers to look attractive in a mirror)!



Lighting Establishes Mood

Proper retail lighting could be a report in and of itself. For the purposes of this toolkit, and the fundamentals for Show, Don't Tell, we are going to focus on window lighting specifically because this type of lighting, when done properly, is what makes windows transparent during the day, and it's what makes storefronts look amazing at night. Also, this type of lighting makes product almost appear to hop through the glass, enticing people into businesses.

The keys to good window lighting are pretty simple:

➤ *Install Spot Light Fixtures Just Inside the Window.* Every window should have spot lights just inside the glass, pointed down toward the products and slightly back toward the store.

➤ *Proper Shape/Size/Color of Bulb.* A bulb is essentially a shower head of light. And the size and spread of a bulb must be selected so the light focuses on the products in the window, not above or below them, so you are essentially aiming your shower head of light! To aim light with high ceilings, a bigger bulb with a narrower spread is needed (spread is the width the light angles out from the bulb). For lower ceilings, smaller bulbs with slightly wider spreads are optimal. Again, color should be lower than 3,000 Kelvin for warmth. And the Color Rendering Index, or CRI, should be above 90, if possible.



This Wedding Dress Store Looks Blessed by the Heavens

Sidewalks

Sidewalks are public spaces where we should see people, product, and activity. Human beings are pack animals, and we are wired to go do, and see, what other people are doing. And the sidewalk is the most public place to showcase product, to *show* something about your business, and draw people. The bottom line is that if a district doesn't make its sidewalks appealing and attractive, it is costing sales.

In this report we are going to look at the types of sidewalks we usually encounter on corridors and in downtowns: street sidewalks and building sidewalks. Below, please note which sidewalk types marry to the Main St, downtown, and State Highway infrastructure found in both communities.

CORRIDORS/HIGHWAYS

- Street Sidewalks
- Building Sidewalks

SMALL TOWN DOWNTOWNS

- Building Sidewalks

Street Sidewalks. In arterial form, these are the kinds of sidewalks that have street on one side, parking lot on the other. They may be the most sad and neglected types of sidewalks in America. Ways to improve the street sidewalk were discussed in the Property Owner Toolkit because these changes are typically considered improvements undertaken by property owners.

Building Sidewalks. This type of sidewalk, built directly next to buildings, is present in both downtown and in corridor development. How can businesses use these sidewalks to improve sales and ramp up positive brand association? Two ways:

1. Know your Zone
2. Follow the Rules!

Know Your Zone!

Building sidewalks have two zones, the “store zone” and the “district zone”.

The Store Zone is the area of the sidewalk right next to businesses. In the store zone, every business should be showing customers something unique and interesting about what they do (like the yarn store, above right).



Giant Ball of Yarn on Yarn Store Sidewalk
(Photo Courtesy of Megan Curry)

The District Zone. This is the area near the curb of the building sidewalk. This is where you place repetitive banners, wayfinding for a strip mall, benches, street furniture, district landscaping, etc.

Follow The Rules!

Sidewalk Rule #1. The store zone can invade the district zone. It is perfectly normal, even desirable, for stores to put their own stamp of identity on the entire sidewalk.

Sidewalk Rule #2. The district zone should not invade the store zone. District identifiers are repetitive and, when located right in front of businesses, aren't actually showing anything unique about the offerings in the establishments. In fact, if the same bench, planter, or piece of street furniture is found in front of all businesses, it will all appear the same to passersby, and they will tune out the businesses because there is nothing distinct to catch their attention.



Building Sidewalk Zones

SHOW, DON'T TELL EXAMPLE

Here is an example of the impact of Show, Don't Tell using windows, lighting, and sidewalks to offer a new visual experience in a service office business—Love Travel—in the small downtown area of Auburn, WA.

Right: This window is dark, it provides no store transparency, and it has an old, faded poster propped up against a staircase, and some poinsettia plants leftover from Christmas six months before. There is a much more dynamic story about travel to tell here!



Before



LIGHTING. The first thing we did was install the correct size, shape, and color of light bulb into their window lighting infrastructure and turned it on. This made the window transparent.

WINDOW. Next, we decorated the window with items that **SHOWed** the type of travel people would be making in this season (it was cold), with a colorful display mostly reusing items already found throughout the travel agency—posters, luggage, etc.

SIDEWALK. And last, we brought the story out to the sidewalk. The owner had a collection of antique uniforms in the agency, so we bought a form for her to use with these over time. In this instance, with our tropical cruise/travel theme, we chose all weather Hawaiian hula material for the form as well as all weather nautical flags. All of this is better than an A-board sign. The skirt and flags move gently in the wind, they make everyone smile when they go by, and they are tactile to touch and interact with. (And they can be moved inside easily at the end of every day.)

Right: And, of course, the window is sensational at night, reminding everyone traveling through when the business is closed that they might want to take a cruise! This building is also making downtown look incredible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. They are a good steward of the store sidewalk and are adding to district experience, open or closed.



Biz Toolkit #2: Leverage Adjacencies

Adjacencies in retail-theory are the science of what merchandise is placed adjacent to each other in a store to increase sales. The same theories apply to building brand in a retail district. How do you do a better job of connecting what is there and cross-pollinating sales and retail activity between the businesses?

There are two broad types of adjacencies to consider in a district. The first is physical and the second is emotional.

Physical Adjacencies

Everything that is next to a business impacts that business, whether it is a bus stop, a parking lot, or another store. You have to leverage what is adjacent to a place of business so that the sum of the parts is greater than each individual element.

To develop adjacencies, you must first get businesses to work together and get to know each other. Believe me, there is no business that can't figure out how to create an adjacency with their neighbors.

As an example, let's take two disparate uses, such as a dentist and a bar. It would seem, on the surface, difficult to create an adjacency. But a creative new dental practice did just that. They thought about what bars need and they came up with coasters. So they created funny, original coasters that could be used as a coupon and provided them to the adjacent bar. The coasters were so popular, he now provides them to other bars on the street, which is a busy corridor that also serves as a State designated "high and wide" freight route.



Dentist's Coaster



Dentist's Coaster Coupon

These are funny. These create connection. They are a great example of creating a physical adjacency between two very different types of businesses.

This same dentist pipes music towards a bus stop next to his office to make waiting for transit a more enjoyable experience for folks on the sidewalk. This is not only thoughtful, but he's really owning the adjacency of the bus stop.

Every business needs to engage with what is next to them, particularly focusing on creating nodes around places where people get out of their car and walk.

Emotional Adjacencies

Emotional adjacencies are things that you might be able to interconnect within your district, around a vertical market or a theme. Events can also create emotional adjacencies.



Emotional Adjacency: Weddings!

Examples:

In Tigard OR, besprinkled around their downtown was a wedding planner, a high-end stationary store, a jewelry store, a caterer, and one of the largest ballroom dance floors west of the Mississippi. These businesses were not physically next to one another, but they had a natural emotional adjacency around weddings they could have been collaborating upon.



Great Collection of Man Businesses on Old 27

One of my favorite possibilities for creating a strong emotional adjacency was in the light-industrial area of Old 27, a former State Highway in central Michigan. The area contained an auto junk yard that was a large regional draw for everyone from artists to car enthusiasts, it had multiple types of lumber yards, a sprinkler contractor, sports bas, auto body shops, kitchen

& bath places, and the list goes on and on.

Everyone wanted to “improve” this district by replacing this vibrant set of businesses with establishments such as an Outback Steakhouse. Really though, they already had a very successful district with a distinct brand. They just needed to do a better job of Show, Don’t Tell around it being the best **“man district”** in the region!

PUBLIC SECTOR/AGENCY TOOLKIT

The public sector and agency role in revitalization is several-fold. First, agencies need to collaborate with the private sector to implement their toolkits, incentivizing and facilitating a series of changes, often small, over a period of time. Second, they need to think about the areas under their bailiwick — roads, the public realm, zoning, code — and how they can be used to boost economic activity. And third, the public sector should be thinking about how to intentionally catalyze development that benefits a wide cross section of people.

Public Sector/Agency Toolkit #1: Incentivize Incremental Improvement

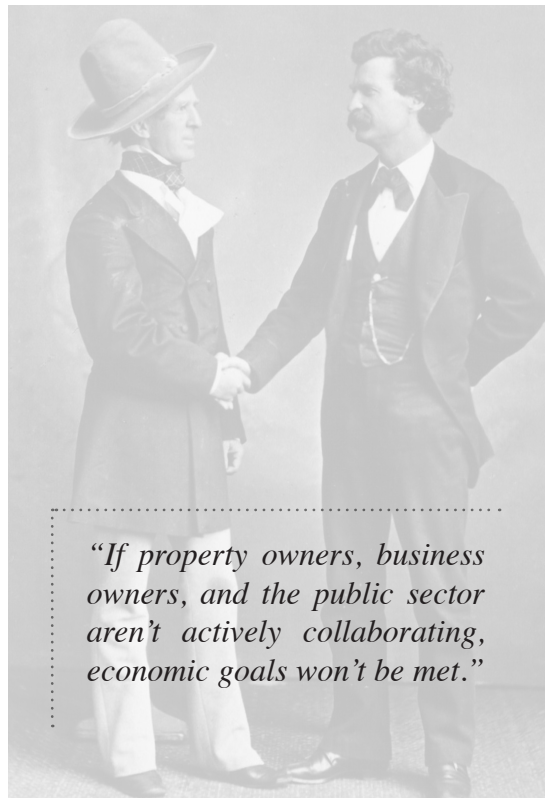
The public sector and agencies interested in revitalization should be creating programs to support and incentivize the private sector activities previously outlined in this report. Just as a district is greater than the sum of its parts, revitalizing a district is about achieving a greater good through a series of small, medium and sometimes large investments.

Incentivizing Incremental Changes includes the following steps:

- Quantify & Focus
- Assemble the Team
- Use the Power to Convene
- Create Improvement Programs

Quantify & Focus

While any property owner or business owner can individually implement changes based on the recommendations in this report to improve their core ventures, the public sector and agencies should take a 10,000 foot view of what they would like to accomplish in terms of improving Ojai and Meiners Oaks prior to zooming in on specific projects and investments.



“If property owners, business owners, and the public sector aren’t actively collaborating, economic goals won’t be met.”

In general, the public sector and agencies should be encouraging interventions in places where they will have the most economic impact first. And, they should be considering what sorts of district characteristics and identity they are trying to work toward so all of the public sector/agency toolkit is aligned with the end results that are desired.

The more concentrated the improvements are in areas that augment active uses and good infrastructure, the more likely it is that these interventions will be successful.

Assemble the Team

Who are the designers, architects, contractors, engineers, planners, development consultants, brokers, and generally talented creative people in your community and region that are interested in collaborating on how to make your existing buildings look incredible, provide a framework for tenant success, and be a good home for active uses? This team can work on everything from building code upgrades, healing bad mid-century storefront remodels, and picking paint colors for a fabulous three-color paint scheme.

When a district's property owners are willing to do something new and different with their buildings, part of the public sector/agency role should be to help connect owners with the resources that can ensure projects will be successful. The public sector needs a go-to list of people that love the "improve what you have" puzzle and enjoy working within the existing fabric of a place that currently has buildings, businesses and a brand.

The Power to Convene

Successful districts usually have a tight-knit band of people working in concert to promote their district, lobby for their district, and advocate for change in their district. Every single business and every single building is impacting every other business and every other building in all of your commercial districts. No man is an island in a commercial district. And if they aren't working together, it's akin to working against each other. The public sector and non-profit agencies are uniquely positioned to use their power to convene to gather together and organize the private sector commercial community to help to improve commerce and experience.

This power is best used to a) bring educational resources to the table for the district; b) provide connections to professional services; and c) create a platform for information sharing between different agencies, groups, and stakeholders in the downtown. The power to convene can be ...as grass roots as gathering a group to repaint a building; ...as simple as sembling artsy creative types to complete window merchandising projects for service businesses; ...as technical as helping a specific property owner with vacancies or inactive buildings through one-on-one technical assistance; as supportive as helping your downtown association; ...or as fun as hosting tours of in-process facade improvement projects so owners can learn from each other!

Notice that the convenings suggested above are usually built around taking direct action on a specific project, or focused on a specific group and bringing tools to the table for their needs. It's always easiest to build relationship around the shared experience of actually doing something to make things better! So try to gather people around action, not organization.

Improvement Programs

It is common for the public sector and agencies to try to catalyze improvement by placing public funds into one large mega project somewhere. Unfortunately, even if you complete one exciting new project somewhere, if the rest of the existing businesses and buildings are not executing on creating a great experience, it won't really matter.

To make real progress, you have to weave together a tapestry of new visual experiences within the existing fabric of Meiners Oaks and Ojai. This means incentivizing a mix of changes. The most proven way to do this is through various types of improvement programs. When creating these programs, consider how to take advantage of volunteer help and affordable/guerilla approaches to improvement that can be completed over time, for smaller amounts of money.

Generally, for smaller communities with limited resources, I like to consider how to develop programs that might appeal to business owners and property owners through modest investments. Examples of three types of programs I would consider right now for Ojai and Meiners Oaks include:

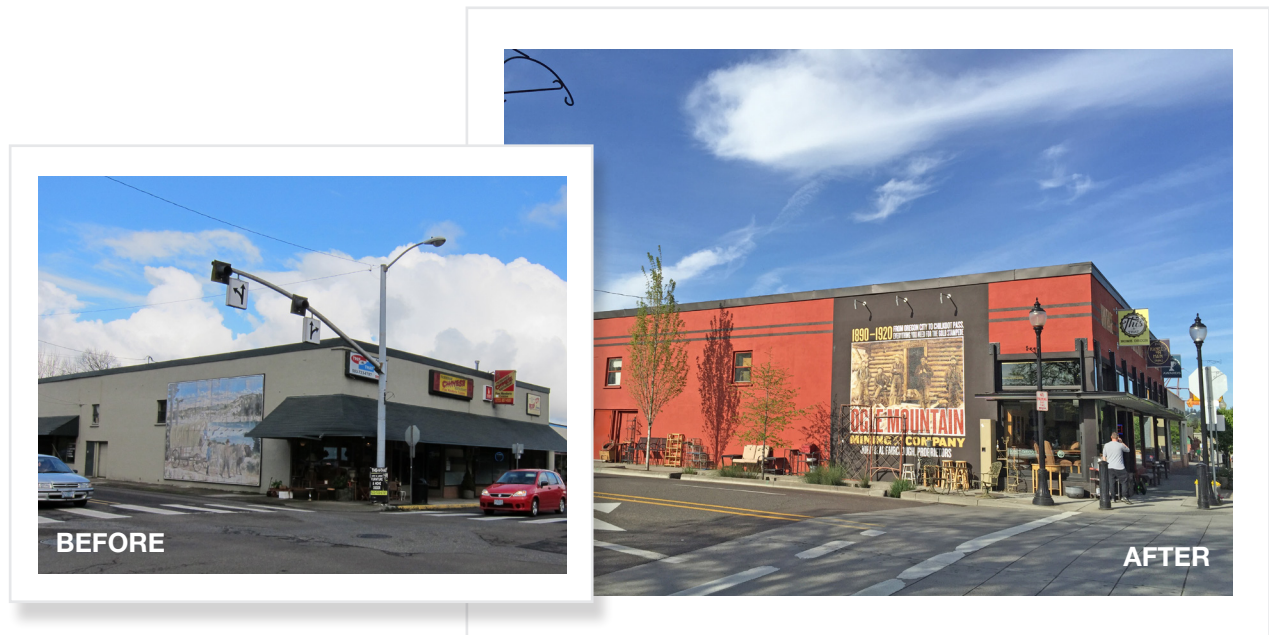
WINDOW IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM. Provide financial resources to businesses just for the development of better window displays and making those displays more visible. Infrastructure covered by such a program might include: installation of track lighting with moveable heads, light bulbs, display platforms up to where the storefront window sits, storefront window ceiling grids, replacement of reflective window film with transparent window film, and display fixtures. Assistance could also include merchandising and display classes as a launch for this program. These grants can be matching or not, and they can be as small as \$300 to \$500.

A program such as this could be funded by one entity, but administered by another. For example, it could be funded by the EDC, but administered by the Chamber.

PAINT IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM. This would provide dollars toward paint supplies and color consulting. This would be most valuable for Meiners Oaks, which could really become a bright and cheery counterpoint to the relentless creamy tastefulness of downtown Ojai! The reason why having some design assis-

tance is important is that choosing three colors to go on a building that will highlight building detail is not easy. Without help, people will give up and you will end up with more beige and gray!

COLOR WORKS MAGIC IN DOWNTOWN OREGON CITY, OREGON



PUBLIC ART PROGRAM. Economically functioning downtowns are great places for people. We want people to be encouraged to circulate, to get out of their cars, to hang out. In order to do this, we need to offer experiences that satisfy the walker, that is people traveling at 3 miles per hour. The textures, details and senses that are engaged at 3 miles per hour are very different than those that are engaged at 40 miles per hour, the speed at which many cars zip through town.

Exciting downtowns, whether they be large or small, are very savvy about creating those human scale multisensory experiences partially through public art programs. These can be commissioned pieces in the public realm, or collaborations with the private sector to include art on building walls!

There's never any such thing as too much art, at least not that I've get to experience! This is something you can do slowly, over time, as budget allows.

Remember, when it comes to improvement programs, there is no better way to build relationship between the public and private sector than for the public sector to say, *"We are going to bring you some technical expertise on how to make more money from your building and your business. And, we are going to give you some funds to implement*

what you learn.” And there is no better way to build relationship between the people who own, live, and work in a district than to have them come together to spend this money wisely.

Public Sector/Agency Toolkit #2: Reward What You Want to See

Generally, development goes through these two stages. First, improve what you have in terms of buildings, roads, place, and businesses. Once you have a stable market, then market rate new construction becomes more viable. When you are in the “improve what you have” stage, it has to be cheaper and easier to rehabilitate a building than to build new. And, it has to be possible to bring in active uses without triggering building form that hurts the downtown environment or incurs unnecessary fees. If a place’s fee and code structure is set up to regulate new greenfield development, it can make adaptive reuse, site intensification, and active tenanting almost impossible. If a place has very restrictive parking minimums, it can be difficult to develop with the sort of lot coverage that downtowns need to be successful.

Enticing building owners and businesses to improve their buildings and land, or encouraging the correct type of new construction, usually involves the following from the perspective of the public sector toolkit:

- **Fee & Tax Structure.** If a simple improvement project triggers greenfield-scale impact fees, requires all new utility upgrades, and tacks on street improvements, then rehabilitation will never happen because places with economic challenges cannot support these fees.
- **Zoning and Use.** Active uses and blended uses need to be encouraged and allowed. Zoning in particular needs to allow for a mix of activity and be flexible, especially now as retail is changing. And, zoning needs to be out of the business of regulating mandatory parking (although it can stay in the business of setting parking maximums so downtown doesn’t turn into a single giant parking lot).
- **Circulation.** Downtowns and Main Streets need to be a good places to walk around, instead of being easy places to drive though. To be successful, a street in these kinds of districts needs to be safe to cross and safe to walk along. Traffic should slow not because of a posted speed limit, but because the road environment causes drivers to travel the correct speed. When it comes time for highway road improvement projects, treatments that stress the Main St function of the road will be paramount, particularly in Ojai with the State Highway as the main drag.
- **Prize Activity.** To create more cross pollination, activity, and hopefully more intentional economic opportunity, downtown Ojai and Meiners Oaks should continue to encourage and/or add active businesses and buildings to their commercial districts. This is particularly the case in Meiners Oaks. Since upgrading the use of a building, or adding more density on a parking lot or empty lot can trigger a host of expensive

upgrades, the City and County should consider zoning/building code, fee structures, and parking minimums to determine what structural and/or financial impediments might exist to increase intensity of use, especially if projects are providing housing suitable for service employees and economic opportunity for lower-income entrepreneurs.

- **Permeability.** Wherever possible, new development in downtowns should be interconnected and maximally accessible by pedestrians. In a downtown/Main St environment, if streets are being created, grids should be pursued. If buildings are being constructed, they should be walkable from adjacent buildings and projects.

Two areas the City and County should be looking at right away in terms of rewarding what it wants to see through the zoning and code are to a) begin developing a parking plan (from the downtown parking toolkit); and, b) encouraging more trolley bus usage by tourists.

Parking Plan

There is not enough real estate in a small town downtown or Main St to compete with suburban infrastructure in terms of parking ratios. As a result, a downtown or Main St that tries to compete with the high parking ratios and minimums of suburban form will typically be less successful than one that embraces the strengths of being a downtown.

Too much parking in a downtown or Main St means it does not deliver on the fundamental economic building block of downtown commerce: great experiences for walkers.

Now, that doesn't mean you don't do anything about parking. It just means you have to create and implement a downtown parking toolkit that responds to the realities of downtown economics. (Hint: the downtown parking toolkit looks nothing like the suburban parking toolkit!)

The kinds of steps in the downtown or Main St parking toolkit include:

- **Clearly Stripe On-Street Parking.** This is particularly important where there is parking along the State Highway along the edges of the downtown district in Ojai.
- **Start Collecting Data.** This doesn't have to be an expensive outside consultant. Your Chamber or high school classes could work together to collect parking usage data over time, perhaps rolling it into a regular course offering for assessment during various semesters.

There is a great guide to affordable volunteer processes for obtaining parking data that was developed in 2013 by the Oregon Transportation & Growth Managements, “Parking Made Easy: A Guide to Managing Parking in Your Community”. Specifically, Chapter 7 will be most helpful for developing community-based surveying capacity.

Generally, you want to ensure you are making decisions about parking from a position of knowledge, not myth! So data tracking is critical. You want to quantify your on-street and off-street capacity, your public and private capacity, how capacity is being used, and what turnover is.

- **Form a Parking Subcommittee.** Over time, your downtown or Main St group should have a subcommittee that becomes your parking working group.
- **Chart a Downtown Parking Course.** Generally, downtowns want to prioritize customers and encourage commerce with their on-street parking. As a downtown organization becomes more solidified, it should create its own downtown parking pledge, perhaps something like the Gresham Customer First plan, which has its own logo, shown to the right.



A downtown parking pledge should be prioritizing customers for the best on-street spaces, moving employees to the edges. Or, moving long-term parkers, such as people attended a half day spa session, to a shared private lot. Or, encouraging park sharing between businesses on private lots. Or, developing an e-assist bike share program to keep tourists out of their cars. Or, creating a parking improvement district, which taxes owners to pay for maintenance on lots private owners agree to share.

A good rule of thumb for these discussions is to let the 85% rule govern your thinking. The accepted metric in parking is if 85% of your parking is full most of the time, then you are ready to take the next step in your parking plan... timed parking, or seasonal permit parking, or parking meters, or permit parking, or the development of the garage. It depends where you are on the continuum! But you must have the data to make the right decision!

- **Remove Parking Minimums.** Most downtowns that are serious about economic development, regardless of size, have been removing their parking minimums for commercial uses in the downtown core. And, in some cases, they are establishing maximums so that new craters of parking are not created. This helps to encourage the adaptive reuse of existing structures, it makes it easier to tenant with active uses, and it encourages site intensification on parking lots, making downtown better and more walkable.

Public Sector/Agency Toolkit #3: Intentionality

There is quite a bit of tension in the Ojai Valley around rapid displacement and a deep change in the character of the communities that call it home. Unfortunately, market forces exact their toll on cities, whether people want them to or not. So, while it's not possible to stop change, it is possible to shape the change a city would like to see. This means looking beyond the usual “jobs at all costs” economic development strategy, and instead consider how to foster intentional policy approaches that afford a wide cross section of people access to opportunity, wealth building, and housing in your communities.

There is no better place than downtown to be the epicenter of an economic development approach that is by the Ojai Valley for the Ojai Valley.

As an example, consider the Portland Mercado project, which was completed by Hacienda CDC in Portland, OR to create a microenterprise ecosystem around food for the Latino immigrant community.

It includes training, start-up food cart spaces for rent, access to a commercial kitchen, and stand-alone market hall spaces for more experienced operators.

In the Portland Mercado's first year of business, they reported that their kitchen served 44 start-up businesses. According to Hacienda, the kitchen supports low income entrepreneurs of color, particularly women and Latinos, and they have met that goal. “85% of businesses identified as women operated, Latinos or people of color, while 70% reported income at 80% or below the median family income. The current rate at \$14.50 an hour for most renters is designed to achieve our mission to help businesses with barriers succeed.”



The Portland Mercado Is a Beloved Community Asset!

PORTLAND MERCADO



This guerilla redevelopment project completely energized a dead corner with empty parking lots and has become a beloved community asset. And just recently, it catalyzed a new housing project directly adjacent that will provide affordable housing.

Business Resiliency Next Steps

Specifically around the idea of agencies and the public sector helping to develop business resiliency, there are several avenues that the greater Ojai region could explore. We will be looking at this through the lens of the three fundamental ways you can increase sales in a district or in a business: 1) by selling more to existing customers; 2) by increasing conversion rate; and 3) by bringing new customers in the door.

Selling More to Existing Customers

When you are using this technique in a store, you could be doing many things. You could be figuring out what else your customers might need and providing it for them. For example, Trader Joe's began carrying produce and milk so their existing customers would buy more when in the store. This technique could involve having staff do a better job of explaining, highlighting, or calling attention to products existing customers might not know about. Or, it could involve making it easier for consumers to carry their goods so they are able to purchase more (this is why grocery stores have shopping carts). Or, it could involve interventions that entice people to stay longer, which means they are more likely to purchase something.

Possible Programs

- ✧ A central delivery service that swings through retail businesses in Meiners Oaks and Ojai every day for pick up of purchases, and then delivers them to major hospitality establishments.
- ✧ If consumers have to park on the edges and walk/bike around Ojai, they will buy more while they are there because they will be in the store longer. This is a reason to use congestion and parking limitations to your advantage to drive the behavior you want to see.
- ✧ Particularly in Meiners Oaks, work to connect bigger tourist draw businesses, such as the Farmer and the Cook, with other offerings in the district because people are going to a single business and then leaving.
- ✧ Create more enticing visual connections between commercial nodes to draw people around the district. Remember, getting people to explore the offerings in a Main St or a downtown requires that they circulate, but they will only go where there are visually engaging paths with rewarding offers at the end.
- ✧ Work to develop your creative/maker and agricultural talent in Ojai and Meiners Oaks, so you build businesses from within that make, market, and sell products around the country. This would develop a business base that over time would be less dependent upon tourism, yet is a collection of businesses that tourists would still love to visit and be a part of.

- ✧ Start cataloging publicly owned property in the Ojai Valley and begin targeting these for intentional, social goal development. There needs to be more opportunity for diversity of housing and commercial entrepreneurship for regular valley folk. A big part of the brand of both places is being accessible and real. In this market, without intervention, Ojai (and Meiners Oaks soon after) could quickly become a place filled only with second homes and the hobby businesses of the very wealthy.

Increasing Your Conversion Rate

When a customer walks in a store, then turns around and leaves without buying something, it is usually a direct reflection of challenges with experience. Either the exterior experience did not sufficiently inform the customer what they were getting into, or, something about the interior experience is not working. On the latter, it could be something as simple as smell, bad lighting, rude staff, lack of pricing or interior signage, or an uncomfortable circulation/layout.

Possible Programs

- ✧ Encourage information sharing between businesses to understand who is serving similar client bases and then cross promote between these businesses.
- ✧ Upping your district's "Show, Don't Tell" game, which might entice someone driving through town or going to the park to buy something!
- ✧ Help tourist-focused businesses do a better job of appealing to locals, and vice versa. There are ways to inventory and merchandise a store that can appeal to customers that change seasonally or during days of the week.
- ✧ Create a local discount program, but not one that says, *Hey, we are doing you a favor by giving you a discount*. If you send coupons to locals, it devalues them. Instead, you want to give locals some sort of benefit that makes them feel special! As an example, there is a small beach town in Oregon where the restaurants give locals a discount just by showing their license with a local address. They want locals to know how much they value them during the high season, because they can't make it without them in the low season!



Curate Experiences

Bring in New Customers

The average conversion rate for retail in a mall is about 20%, that means only 1 in 5 people buy something who go in a store. One of the ways you can increase sales is to keep your conversion rate the same, and instead, just increase the number of people coming in your store. (Right now, Meiners Oaks may be more interested in bringing in new customers than Ojai!)

For a business, and for a district, bringing in new customers is about events, promotions, sales, executing on a great storefront visual that draw people, new products, and curation, curation, curation. In this age of unlimited information, it's exhausting to research everything available to us as consumers. Now, we want curation, people to take some of the choice away from us and make good decisions on our behalf, so we can unplug and just enjoy being along for the ride. Districts in particular need to do this. Consumers don't want a giant walking map plunked in their lap. They want someone to tell them where to go!



How many people enter your business? How many buy?

Possible Programs

- ✧ Curate a trolley bus trip of the month! Create a cute accompanying marketing piece and supply it to lodging in the greater Valley. You will kill two birds with one stone. First, you will get people to take the Trolley Bus. Second, you will give them a distinct, wonderful, great day they didn't have to plan.
- ✧ Create a hospitality road show. Get together products, samples, and few makers and owners and visit staff at bigger lodging locations so they can get to know what's new, what's on offer, and where to direct people. They are your gatekeepers. Give them some swag!
- ✧ Over the long-term, you want to think about how you diversify your industry/employee base so that you develop a more robust collection of consumers that can support more local-focused businesses.
- ✧ Place products in each other's stores, and in hospitality locations. An example might be placing an empty growler bottle in an Airbnb that can be filled at a local brewpub, which would drive visitors to a specific restaurant.

Web Diversification

There is interest in helping businesses to diversify in Ojai by extending their market through the power of the Internet. If the EDC/Chamber wants to introduce an Ojai-based central site, I would not begin by trying to build an e-commerce site carrying items available in individual businesses. That would be a very large challenge to manage just from an inventory point of view alone. Remember, people get into brick & mortar businesses because they like the tangibility, they like people, they like interacting. They don't necessarily love accounting, data analysis, and Web interfaces. So I would begin a project like this with a step-by-step approach that slowly builds towards some e-commerce offerings.

1. Help identify emotional adjacencies in Meiners Oaks and Ojai. Figure out what sorts of businesses are currently serving similar customers or offering experiences that can be curated together and think about how to interconnect them. Promotions with websites and social media could help drive traffic to these locations.
2. Curate the trolley trip of the month! Advertise it on the Ojai Valley Site.
3. E-commerce is an area to dip a toe lightly. Highlight a mix of Ojai offerings on the site, start with selling something doable, such as limited edition gift baskets that offer a mix of Ojai-curated delights. You could have individual stores, or interesting personalities in the community sponsor or put these together. (Ultimately, you are telling the story of your community as a part of this!) I might start very simply with Valentines Day, Mother's Day and the Winter Holiday Season. You could, over time add a generic birthday, a generic new baby basket, and a graduation basket.
4. Brick & mortar businesses do best at using the Internet for sales when they are leveraging a relationship they have developed through in person commerce. Consider training to 1) help businesses create consistent web/real life brand experiences; and, 2) consider multiple ways to continue to engage out-of-town customers that aren't necessarily Internet based. For example, a clothing store might send new items that might really suit a valued customer to try on risk free, which they can return if they don't want to keep it.
5. Work to develop a Made Here Marketplace in the real world, and that is mirrored on the Ojai Valley Website. Here, you could offer individual, small batch products for sale from folks who might be able to use and appreciate the curated boost!



Everyone Loves a Trolley Trip!

Incubating businesses that can grow into larger producers and employers in Ojai is part of creating a resilient economy and base of businesses that aren't entirely dependent upon tourism.

MADE HERE DISPLAYS AT COFFEE CONNECTION!



CONCLUSION

Ojai and Meiners Oaks are starting out of the business resiliency blocks with a few advantages most other rural communities don't have: an amazing natural setting, an engaged citizenry, residents with financial resources, and agency and public sector organizations who love their community. On top of that, both have wonderful local businesses with good nodes of commercial activity to build upon and improve.

In addition, there are real opportunities for both districts to connect more deeply with their agricultural roots, their spirit to create, and their interest in becoming more sustainable. What's exciting is that all of these connections would tackle the desire to create a more balanced economy while still retaining all of the authentic brand appeal that attracts tourism! Win, win.



Feed Store!

The three groups that impact economic performance in downtown that have the biggest roles to play in moving these commercial districts in new and exciting directions are property owners, business owners and the public sector. They each have a role to play, as follows:

- *Property Owners.* Visually improving the impact and presence of the mix of buildings from all different eras that exist in downtown will be a key element to driving more traffic to the city center. Owners in Meiners Oaks should focus on differentiating their buildings from one another, really expressing their funky eclectic vibe, and tenancing with outward facing uses. In Ojai, where tourist pressure is at maximum, it would be useful to work with local owners on tenant mixing and programming for long-term economic balance. Also, it would be great to see more physical connectivity between commercial nodes, and to have sites with large parking lots intensify their use with smaller new buildings that have a mix of residential and commercial uses.
- *Businesses.* A distinct identity can be created in any place where there are interesting collections of small, one-of-a-kind businesses, overseen by passionate and experienced store owners, offering world-class service. Small business expertise and performance are the basis upon which you want to brand your districts, helping them to better highlight their offerings and work together to offer an integrated experience. Local business districts can generate high sales per square foot, but they have to execute at a high level, because brick & mortar is more and more about delivering an authentic and fantastic experience rather than about selling a

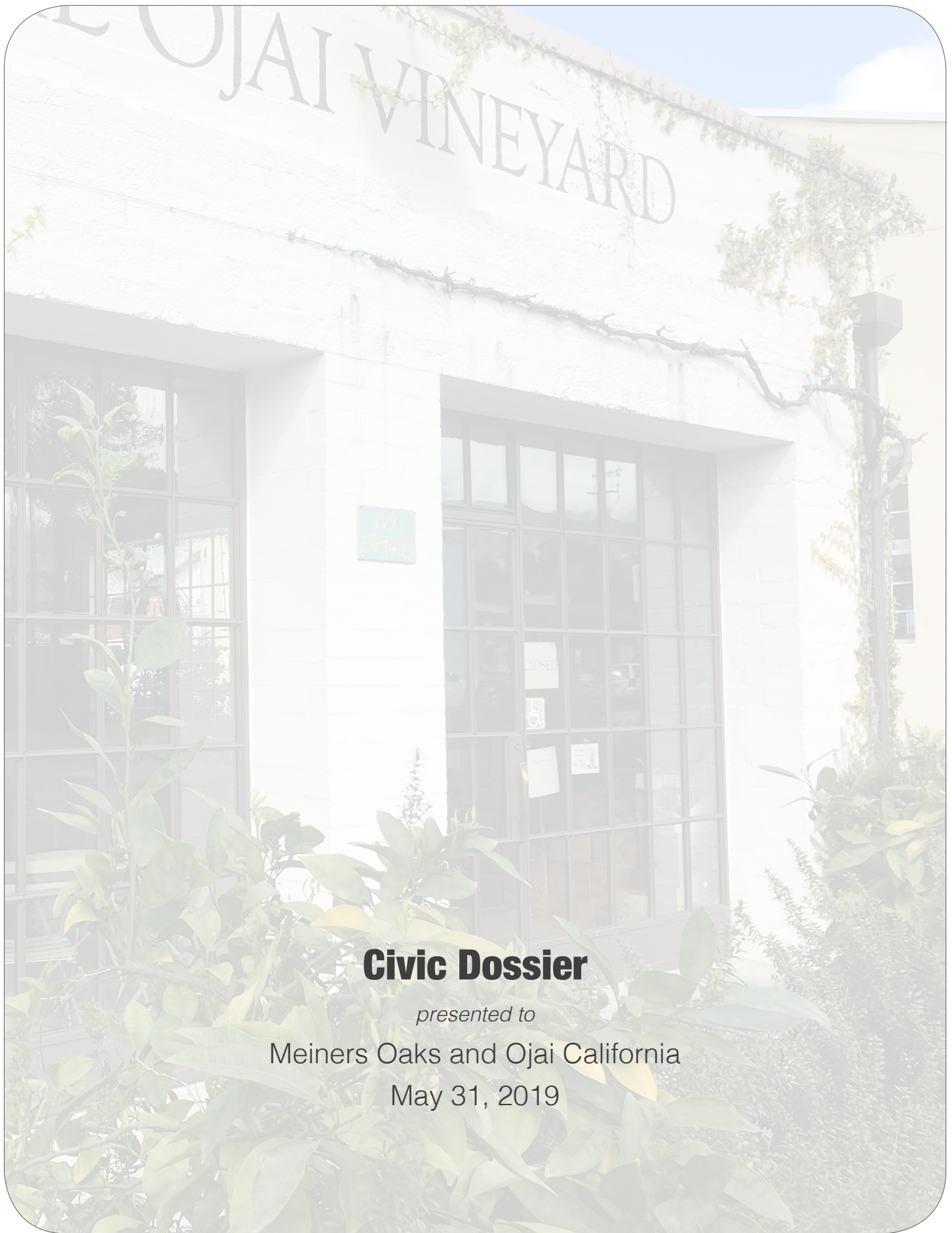
commodity. Business should focus on Show, Don't Tell as much as possible, with great windows, great window lighting, bringing their stories out to the sidewalk, creating an environment with multisensory experiences for everyone passing through downtown. All businesses should be working to interconnect and share information more effectively, within and between both communities, to drive sales and formulate one-of-a-kind adventures.

- » *The Public Sector/Agencies.* The EDC, the Chamber, the City, and the County should be working together to assist the private sector by providing assistance, education and programmatic funding to execute on the basics of brick & mortar excellence. And, they should be thinking about how they can collaborate using their land assets to foster intentional projects that will help provide economic balance and opportunity to a wide variety of people who live and/or work in the valley. Other projects include better connections to agriculture, better utilization of the trolley bus, more aggressive parking policy, and site intensification on empty lots and parking lots to create more intensity of use.



Every Ground Floor Business Should Have a Great Window

Lastly, everyone needs to be collaborating. Small communities cannot afford to have groups of people working to cross purposes. All three of the key stakeholder groups have to choose projects to back together, roll up their sleeves, and get them done. That is how you build real, balanced, local serving communities that also happen to be places people really like to visit!



Civic Dossier

presented to

Meiners Oaks and Ojai California

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