

Please Reject Main Street Retail Mandate

On July 28, 2021 the Pleasanton Planning Commission is set to consider a proposal by the Planning Staff to require that the front 60% of all Main Street buildings be genuine retail. The retail mandate just started recently with the newly adopted Downtown Specific Plan in 2018, which required that the front 25% of Main Street buildings be retail (“active first floor use” in planner talk, which includes restaurants.)

So, why not up the retail mandate to 60%? Main Street cannot support the kind and quantity of retail the Planners are proposing to require. The building spaces are too small, the parking is far way, and there are not enough customers to support that much retail on Main Street. Instead of increased vitality, we will get empty buildings and struggling businesses – the opposite of vitality.

When City Council discussed the possibility of upping the retail mandate to 60% in early June, several Council members pointed out that the 25% retail mandate has only been around for a year and half, during covid, during which many building owners have lost tenants, forgiven rent, and are having trouble renting spaces.

The Planners proposed mandatory retail in 1993, 2001, and 2009. In each case the Pleasanton Downtown Association opposed the mandate, and City Council rejected the mandate. This was a downtown, not a shopping center.

Between 1994 and 2004 retail sales in Downtown doubled – without a retail mandate – because the City spent on widened sidewalks for Main Street, and opened sidewalk dining, which brought customers Downtown, especially later in the day, which led to more retail sales.

The 2018 Downtown Specific Plan also prohibits banks on Main Street. For many years the Planners required that banks had to have a branch in downtown. Now many buildings are adapted to banking and occupied by banks. Banks bring customers Downtown every day, which helps our struggling retail stores.

The Pleasanton Planners have not noticed that nationwide retail space is substantially overbuilt, and often vacant. Small retail specialty stores, of the kind that could fit into the undersized building spaces with inadequate parking in Downtown, have been savaged by the increase in ecommerce, like by Amazon.

The Planning Commission will have made their recommendation by the time this column is printed, but City Council makes the final decision. I suggest that City Council please leave the retail mandate at only 25%, and see if that helps or hurts Downtown vitality. We do not need more empty buildings and struggling businesses on Main Street.